

DAWN OF HERESIES



BRIAN HODGE

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“All great truths begin as blasphemies.”
— George Bernard Shaw

CHAPTER ONE

Through the ages, countless members had spent their service to the cult of the Arisen known as Kemsiyet without ever once having seen her, not even in the repose of deathless sleep. Some weren't quite sure they wanted to. Others were entirely sure they didn't.

Declan got that. They revered the *idea* of her, the same as they might once have revered the idea of a god they'd prayed to... but to stand before something so much greater than they were was more than they were confident they could handle. To stand ill-prepared before the eternal was to risk withering before it. It could annihilate you without a thought, just by being itself. It could nullify your existence if you offended it, or if it just woke up in a bad mood.

They often did, the Arisen.

So yeah... Declan understood the reluctance.

Funny old thing, though. It seemed that everyone wanted to see the bog-men. They could handle the bog-men. They might have even gone to see their kind in a museum.

Like this newcomer. Fiona, that was her name. Fiona Moynihan. She'd come on purely in an administrative capacity, back at the manor house. She was a few years out of university but looked as if she should still be there, a young woman with shiny black hair and a wide, pale brow and an appealingly pudgy shape. She couldn't be past her mid-twenties, Declan supposed, a little too old to be his daughter (unless he'd started making his life's bigger mistakes at the age of fifteen, say), but he still looked at her with the same feelings of protectiveness he would have if she were.

And, he found, she had a daughter's capacity to wear him down. A week of it, day after day: *Come on, Declan, show me the bog-men. Please? You're the main one with access. Everybody knows they're out there. It's not like it's any secret, you know. Bog-men, for feck sake! I just want to have a wee look. It's not like she's in there to get mad about it, now is she?* Then, once Fiona had got to know him a bit better, she started getting playful about it, with a little sting behind it: *Oh, big man aren't*

*you, deny me a look at my very own bog-men. And they **are** my people, not yours, you know. Still trying to boss me around in my country, are you, you English thug?*

“Fine,” he decided one night when nothing else was happening. “If it means you’ll give me some peace the rest of my rotation here, let’s go see these lads.” Then he decided to toss a little Nietzsche at her, just for fun: “But mind you take care: if thou gaze long into the bog-men, the bog-men will also gaze into thee.”

Score one for Declan Pierce. Fiona looked as if she might’ve half believed him.

Then out the back door they went, along the flagstone path between the manor house and the tomb. The lamps burned, overhead on poles and mounted on the back of the house, a cold and sterile light that, bright as it was, still seemed feeble against the black of night beyond.

Straggle out of the ocean onto the southern coast, and wander in through the ancient Viking streets of Waterford, then make your way past where the northern suburbs thinned out into the green and rolling hinterlands of County Kilkenny, and that was where they were. It verged on rural here, not so isolated that there was nothing else around, but what was here was spaced well enough that it should have been obvious to anyone passing by that people liked their privacy out this far, and expected you to keep it that way.

All in all, a good place for things to stay buried.

The underground tomb was made of limestone, as was the Georgian house that fronted it, but the house, old as it was at 270 years, was but a baby in comparison. The tomb dated back thousands. Bronze Age, they said, and Declan had no reason to doubt this. You’d never know it to look at it from the outside, though. The subtle bulge of mound that crowned it looked natural enough, but the front end had a steel awning that didn’t. A dozen limestone slabs led down to a door heavy enough to protect a bank vault. Taking it at surface value, it looked like the paranoia of some twentieth-century eccentric who’d been terrified the world was going to go up in a blaze of nuclear fire and for some daft reason thought he wanted to survive it. In the bucolic context, the thing was an eyesore — nobody denied this — but at least it was surrounded by enough trees to shield it from the distant view of anyone who found such things a blight upon the landscape.

And to think they used to get by with wood here, disguising the tomb as the entrance to a mine.

At the door, Declan flipped open a weatherproof panel to reveal two sets of keypads. He held the MP5 submachine gun he carried steady with one hand, while he inputted the codes with the other. Both took seven digits, bottom pad first — that was important, too. Nobody who didn’t know better would ever start on the bottom. Input the right codes in the wrong order and you’d trigger a stream of automatic fire from a mounted gun you’d never find even if you spent all day looking for it.

From underground there came the sounds of a motor and the grinding of locks disengaging. For such a massive door, it opened easily, and crossing the threshold

was like three steps of time travel to another era, another place. Bronze Age Ireland meets the long-lost city from a forgotten land that would become Egypt.

Irem, they called it. The City of Pillars. The heart of the Nameless Empire.

Inside the doorway, he hit a switch and triggered twin rows of bulbs running down the length of the chamber.

If you were thinking like a tomb robber, he had no idea how you would even begin to calculate the value of the relics kept here. Maybe no one could. They ranged from the simple to the ornate, earthen bowls and clay urns to magnificent armor and a gleaming obsidian stele inscribed with glyphs that few scholars could even recognize, much less translate. Full of power, they were. Supposed to be, anyway. There was a life force that ran through everything, and these relics had soaked it up from a time before history had a name, and now they radiated it, if you were sensitive to that sort of thing.

And this was just the outer chamber. Thirty paces would take you through a short passageway to an inner chamber, where an empty sarcophagus sat waiting for its resident to return; for whenever the Arisen known as Kemsiyet felt her own life force dwindling, and came back to sleep once more, to let time and the relics and the focused energies of the tomb itself do their work.

But Fiona wasn't here to see those, impressive as they were. She was here to set eyes on the bog-men, and now that she had, she had to work at it to remember how to speak.

They were unsettling things, even when you were expecting them. Most people assumed they would be lying down, the way you might encounter their less fortunate cousins in a museum case. Not these lads. These were sitting upright. On stone benches, no less. A pair of them flanked the doorway to the inner chamber. Another one was just barely visible through the passage, in a far corner.

They had the same leathery look as the ones known to the rest of the world, skin stained brown by the tannin in the bogs where they'd been... not buried, you couldn't say that. Disposed of, that was more like it. But the resemblance ended there. Museum bodies were always sucked in on themselves, softer tissues long gone to leave behind the tanned hide, giving them a deflated appearance except for the skull and ribcage, as long as they were intact.

These? Their bodies were fuller. Still desiccated, of course, but plumper. Step close enough, and you could make out eyelashes, the crinkles around their mouths, the color of their hair — red for one, darker for the other two. One of them seemed to pout, but then why shouldn't he? That wound across his neck was nothing to smile about. They smelled faintly of earth and, if it could have a smell at all, of time.

“And they're still alive?” Fiona said, finally.

“Not quite alive, but not quite dead, either,” Declan told her. “More like they're in a suspended animation, was the way it was explained to me. Just waiting. In case they're needed.”

“Needed for what?”

“In case you get out of hand.”

She cut him a sideways glance that nearly drew blood. “Not even funny, you.”

“They’re sentinels. Another kind of guardian. Even thugs like me need our downtime.” He patted the retractable stock of the MP5 and gave her a grin. “They don’t. Now, if anybody human, who wasn’t supposed to be here, managed to get past the rest of us, and *she* was here... she’d know it, and snap right awake, and that would be the end of them. We’d be picking up the pieces and scrubbing out the bits for a long while. So these three are here for when she’s not. And it’s not impossible something could get in that’s *not* human.”

Little by little, Fiona was working up her nerve to step close, closer, close enough to look them in the eye.

“How did they come to be?” she whispered, as though she might disturb them if she was too loud, and those leathery brown eyelids might pop open at any moment. “Are they like the other bog bodies?”

“Yes and no. They all got their start more or less the same way. There are the ones like Clonycavan Man and Old Croghan Man, that are probably exactly what they appear to be. Killed three ways, throat slashed and bashed over the head and drowned. Or strangled, the ones found with a cord around their neck. Now, whether those were sacrifices or executions, I guess that’ll always be open for debate. Either way, for them, that was the end. But for these three, and I hear there’ve been others, what happened to their bodies was just the beginning.”

The bog-men sat at attention, appearing to listen. And on one level, they were. Declan only hoped that if he got it wrong, they wouldn’t let him know about it.

“What happened to them was an attempt to do here, in this part of the world, the same thing that more knowledgeable people did in Irem. Only instead of creating the ones like Kemsiyet and the rest of the Arisen, this was the result. It was diluted. It went wrong. It was poisoned. Something like that. They had a little piece of the magic from there, but they didn’t know how to use it, and they combined it with a ritual they already knew, and this is what came of it.”

“Is that educated guesswork, or... ?”

“More solid than that.” He pointed through the passage, into the chamber where the empty sarcophagus waited. “She has her ways. Of getting the truth out of the dead. Then, too, back at the house there are records going back centuries. Every generation of us tries to piece together more of her history from whatever memories came back to her whenever she’s been called up for another Descent. It doesn’t always fit together, but there were three times she was able to put together enough fragmentary memories to recall that these lads” — he gestured at the bog-men — “were what drew her here to begin with. To address the situation.”

“Situation,” Fiona said, musing over the word. “You mean, like, how did the means to do even this much, however cocked-up it may be, get here at all?”

Declan nodded. “Exactly.”

She waited for more, and when it didn’t come, she flashed an exasperated look. “Well? How *did* it?”

How much to tell her? Declan wasn’t under any illusions that he knew the full truth of it himself. Turlough, their neo-Iremite priest back on the top floor of the manor house, who spent most days keeping to his books and scrolls... he’d know more. Declan was sure of it.

They were all working on a need-to-know basis here. How much did Fiona need to know for administration — handling the financial holdings and banking transactions, the duty rosters, overseeing upkeep on the manor house? None of that even got close to touching the tomb itself. But, of course, without this tomb and what it held, there never would have been a need for the rest.

“Put it this way. There’s something here that shouldn’t exist. But it does,” he said. “It’s a thing of great power. Probably better you not know what, exactly. Because you’ll want to look — don’t deny it, that’s just human nature — and that wouldn’t go so well for you.”

“One ring to bind them all, that sort of thing?”

“Close enough. It got loose. Came out of Irem before the city itself disappeared, nobody knows how. It came north and west, across the European continent, somebody carrying it, God knows who or what. Made it about as far west as it could go. And it got used.” He waved his hand with a flourish — behold, the bog-men. “Badly.”

“So these three aren’t actually anything to do with the cult at all, right?”

Declan shook his head no. “Only as an unintended side-effect of the whole strange business. She obviously decided to put them to work rather than destroy them.”

Fiona caught herself with a wince. “Sorry about the C-word. Elsa told me you don’t like it, and not to use it around you.”

“Huh. I didn’t think she noticed.”

“What’s your objection to it, if I may ask?”

“The word ‘cult’?” He shrugged, didn’t want to be disagreeable. It was too nice an evening out for that, the cool after a warm day, and wet with the freshness of spring. “It’s one of those words that comes with a lot of baggage I don’t carry.”

Declan paused as a crackle came over the short-range walkie-talkie they used on the grounds. One of the two other guards back inside the manor house, asking him to have a look around, as long as he was outside. Just a look-see. When he told Fiona to stay put, she was none too keen about being left alone with the bog-men. Well, too bad. She’d asked.

He backtracked the length of the tomb, keyed in the exit code to open the blast door from this side, and jogged up the dozen steps back to ground level. He looked,

listened, pivoted, and panned a slow 360. His duty years with the British Armed Forces had given him an internal radar that could never be fully explained to anyone who hadn't experienced it for himself, and he trusted it still. It wasn't telling him anything out of the ordinary.

Declan brought the walkie-talkie to his mouth again. "I'm not picking up on anything out here. What's going on?"

"Aidan got a feeling."

"Define feeling."

"Like something slithered over his future grave, is how he put it."

Not good. Maybe nothing. But potentially not good. "And what about yourself?"

"I'm fine, me. Not a tingle."

"I'll be back inside in a couple minutes."

He slipped down into the tomb again, amused to find that Fiona had put half the chamber's length between herself and the bog-men.

"Seen enough, have you?"

She nodded and told him that she had.

"Then we should go," he said, and they began to move for the exit again. "As for the C-word? To me, the word 'cult' has always meant blind obedience and switching off your brain. I know the word is bigger than that, technically, but..."

"But that's the baggage you don't want to carry," she finished for him.

"Right. So I try to make peace with it this way. In *this* world...?" He proffered his hand to indicate the tomb, the relics, the sarcophagus at the far end. "Underneath it all, there aren't but two reasons for a cult to exist. Either it's dedicated to making things happen, and those could be good or bad. Or it's dedicated to making sure something *doesn't* happen, something that's almost sure to be bad... and that's the one *we're* about here. That's what I'm doing here. Making sure something bad doesn't happen."

And it was as if he knew already, wasn't it? That things weren't right. On some pre-conscious level. Picking that very moment to say that very thing? He knew it was all going wrong before he *knew* that he knew. That was the internal radar for you.

The walkie-talkie gave another static burst, then: "Declan? It's not just Aidan. I'm feeling it too now. Something's off. Get back up here, something's *coming*."

Three reactions — fight, flight, or freeze. He froze. Wrong choice. He couldn't help it. The two of them out here, like this, tomb open? What did he know about this Fiona Moynihan, anyway? She was supposed to have been vetted, and there was nearly always a lineage of acquaintance within the cult of Kemsiyet — you didn't just apply off advertisements — but it was always possible someone could slip through. A mole.

He whirled, checking her hands — empty — then grabbed her by the throat with one hand and snapped the MP5 up with the other as he drove her back against the tomb wall next to the door.

“Who do you really...?”

She might not have been able to speak even if she had anything to tell him. He’d choked off her voice and most of her air. It was her eyes that defused him. Frightened, yes. Surprised, too. But terrified-and-knowing had a different look than terrified-and-clueless. She clutched at his wrist with both hands and genuinely had no idea what was going on, other than that she probably thought she was about to die.

From somewhere in the house came the first burst of gunfire.

“Sorry,” he said, and let her go, with a gentle shove back deeper into the tomb. “Stay here. Whatever’s going on, you’ll be safe down here.”

He slammed the door behind him and took the steps two at a time into a night that sounded like it was going all kinds of wrong.



CHAPTER TWO

As Declan sprinted across the grounds toward the manor house, the walkie-talkie went off one last time, somebody shouting the word “Façade!” before going silent again. Façade? First reaction, it didn’t even make sense. But then, when situations blew up, not much ever did.

He came in through the back door of the manor house, staying low, keeping to the walls, visually tracking over the barrel of the MP5 and using his ears to put together a mental map of the hot zones. Second floor, directly overhead, it sounded like a wrecking crew had moved into the priest’s quarters. From down here, ahead and to the left, came more gunfire, along with screaming from at least three locations.

He cleared the big country kitchen, then continued up the wide central hallway, until a figure swung into view up ahead from the right, saw him, and lurched straight for him. Declan didn’t have to think, just fired a burst into center of mass that knocked the figure off its feet and flat onto its back on the hardwood floor. He saw spray. No body armor — good. This one was down for keeps.

Until it wasn’t. Within moments, it was back on its feet and coming for him again like nothing had happened.

Stupid. How could he have been so stupid. Not façade. *Fasad.*

He could see it better now that it was closer, a once-living face that had become a patchwork nightmare of old lacerations that appeared half healed, half infected. They dribbled and suppurated, and the thing smelled dead already. Yet its eyes, its entire demeanor, were calm, even joyful in its purpose. He found that the worst of all.

He blew it off its feet again and followed it down this time, aiming at the floor and chewing up that beautiful old wood as he raked the muzzle back and forth, using bullets like a guillotine. When the Fasad’s head jittered free of its shoulders, he kicked it, sent it spinning back up the hall.

Let’s see you get up from that.

The main melee sounded like it was coming from the archives room, a library whose walls of bookcases had been supplemented with file cabinets and tallboys. Declan detoured into the branching hallway that would take him there, until moments later, ten paces left to go, the entire room seemed to erupt with a concussive blast that knocked him to the floor and sprayed a blizzard of meat and bone out the doorway to splatter into the far wall.

Ears numbed, balance unsteady, he struggled to his feet again and continued ahead into the archives. Another of the shock troops was still in here, missing an arm but ambulatory, dazed but plenty of fight left in it. His gun's magazine was empty and he hadn't been carrying a spare, but he spotted a machete-like blade lying on the floor near the severed arm. He snatched it up, closed the distance, and swung with all he had.

The blade was buried in its head before he truly saw the Fasad's face.

I know you. Old wounds and new wounds, he still saw through them. *I know you.*

The lifeless hand came scrabbling for his throat anyway. He torqued the blade and wrenched it free, a chunk of skull coming with it, then swung as many times as it took to make sure the Fasad had nothing left to work with.

The floor was littered with bodies and parts and debris, laced together with pools and spatters of blood. He wasn't anywhere near thinking why or how yet, just what next. Aidan, the guard who had first felt this coming, roused in the wreckage and pushed himself to sit upright. He scooted back against a toppled cabinet, one hand slapping over a grievous shoulder wound that looked like nothing so much as a bite. Another casualty in the making, he just wasn't there yet.

He nodded to ascertain they were clear down here, then jabbed a finger toward the ceiling — upstairs, right — then handed over another grenade.



The door closed behind him — too massive to clang, more like a dense clunk — and then, *oh great*, it was just her and the bog-men.

Fiona massaged the sides of her neck where Declan's fingers had pinched in like a clamp, still trying to process what had just happened. The blink of an eye... the change in him had been that quick. A couple weeks of getting-to-know-you banter, a final thaw, a few minutes in which this lithe, compact fella seemed to be taking her under his wing, and then bam. Up against the wall and looking at the no-nonsense granite of his face over the sights of his machine gun and painfully aware of its muzzle a foot in front of her nose, thinking this was going to be it for her. And she would never know why.

How do you brush off a thing like that with a simple *sorry*?

You don't, arsehole.

Then again, they did have bigger things to worry, didn't they? Even after Declan had let go, there was a roaring in her ears, so she couldn't completely trust them... but that really had been gunfire coming from the house, hadn't it?

By this time of night, there weren't that many people left in the house — a lot of them who had signed on for this life, this cult, didn't live here. Researchers, devotees, and yeah, a few strange ones, as well, they had places of their own in the nearby villages of Milepost and Slieverue, with some as far down as Waterford.

But she began to fear for whoever was left. Aidan and Gary, the other two guards with Declan. And Elsa, whose health was getting dodgy enough to start training Fiona as her replacement. A couple others who were staying late to compile research in the archives.

And the priest, of course, Turlough, who saw to the ceremonial and ritual business that she didn't have a clue about yet, other than the fact that if you had a need to call one of the Arisen out of sleep, you really had to know what you were doing. He was getting up there in years, Turlough was, and *did* live on-site, with his residence on the top floor.

She began to pace, confined down here like a child sent to her room, with no way of knowing what was going on and no way to help. She was supposed to take Declan's word for it, end of story? He'd been a few pounds per square inch away from choking the life out of her, and never mind the gun. Could be he was a little too tightly wound for everybody's own good.

She hurried back to the door and looked for the exit controls. *Another* keypad? On the inside? Either somebody hadn't really thought this through... or they were as concerned with keeping something *in* the tomb as keeping the rest of the world out.

Ready to try something, anything, her finger halted an inch from the pad. Push the ones on the other side of the door wrong, and bullets would fly. Did she really want to bet her life that they hadn't rigged up something on this side, as well?

She got as quiet as she could, listening for any outside noise that might filter through. Nothing. The tomb might as well have been soundproofed. When she went back to pacing, her shoes sounded very loud on the stone floor.

It crept up on her without her knowing exactly when it had started... a feeling that first found a wormhole into her through the fear and embarrassment and anger she was already harboring.

A feeling? Aidan had had a feeling, too.

Within moments, it had begun to feed on itself to take on a life of its own, like an emotion that was being forced on her from the outside instead of coming from within. All at once Fiona wanted to hide even though she was already in the world's best hiding place. Her breath quickened, her stomach rolled and churned. She'd only heard of panic attacks, never experienced one herself, but they had to feel something like this.

A cold fist seemed to squeeze her heart, and she felt pulled back to the helpless moment when Declan had pushed her against the wall. At first she'd thought her life *hadn't* flashed before her eyes, but now she realized it had. It had, and she'd missed it, because she'd hardly lived any life worth flashing. Useless, she was. A non-entity, a waste of space and resources. Better that she'd never been born.

I know what this is, she thought, a glimmer of awareness beginning to fight back. *This isn't me. This isn't me...*

But if it wasn't her, that was its own bad news.

They'd warned her of this. Elsa had told her this could happen. Very often, the Arisen inspired feelings of dread just by being themselves. Their ancient, deathless selves. Sybaris, they called it. Sometimes it was merely a feeling of unease. Other times, they warned, it could be utterly crushing. They weren't kidding — this was like finding herself enveloped in a darkening void that fed on hope, and knowing something worse would be waiting when the last of hers was consumed.

It depended on the source.

She wanted to claw at her throat. Wanted to claw her way through the limestone walls. Wanted to fold up in a ball and disappear. Where was this even *coming* from?

Then she heard a faint sound of scratching, scraping.

As slowly as she'd ever done anything in her life — it took that much exhausting effort, and left her streaming with cold sweat — Fiona turned to face the far end of the tomb. *This* was dread.

Dread was turning to face the bog-men.

The eyes of the one on the left opened. Then the eyes of the one on the right. From the inner chamber, there came a sound like nothing she'd ever heard, a raspy rustling like the first breath drawn in centuries by a pair of lungs dragged from earth and water.

They began to move.

They began to stand.



Declan went scrambling for the entry foyer. Big old house, high ceilings, wide staircases, the way they built them back then — he felt unnervingly exposed as he pounded up the central stairs, push-pulling at the banister for support. He raced down another hall toward the sounds of screams that hadn't entirely died out yet.

The priest's quarters.

The priest of Kemsiyet — the latest in a very long line — was a rangy, white-haired bloke named Turlough. Declan had always found him an oddly compelling blend of the whimsical, the morose, and the childlike. But then, what was he supposed to be like? A man who'd devoted his life to a woman who'd been killed more than

6000 years ago... sacrificed and mummified and resurrected... who was now both more and less than human... and whom he might only see arisen a handful of times across the entire span of his life. Declan had always suspected there was a part of him that hadn't just loved her in the sense of devotion, but was *in love* with her.

And dear God, it had brought him to this.

Two more Fasad had dragged him to the floor like wolves on a stag, and now knelt over him, one on either side. They had opened him from gullet to pubis, and were taking their time inside. They'd pulled this, loosened that, made a game of feeding on the other. It was what they did. They were creatures made of old wounds inflicting new ones for amusement. And still, moaning as feebly as he kicked, Turlough wasn't yet dead. Of course not. Suffering could only be wrung from the living. They'd keep this going as long as they could.

Judgment call. Declan knew what he'd want if it were him. There would be no coming back from this. There was only ending it.

He lobbed the grenade into the middle of them, and took cover in the hall while it bestowed the only mercy left.

Silence then. Or there would have been, if not for the ringing in his ears. He made sure there wasn't enough of these last two Fasad sufficiently intact to pose a problem before they could be burned. He was shaking, and trying not to, deliberately breathing deep into his belly. That was the quickest way he knew to pull back from the edge of panic. Control the breath, everything else would follow.

Knowing what these things were still didn't prepare you for actually seeing them for the first time, seeing what they did. Some things you just couldn't train for.

He broke into a run again, first from room to room here on the second floor, to make sure they were empty, then back down the stairs. Because it dawned on him these things might not have come alone. Where the Fasad were, there was every possibility that something worse was near... .

The one who had *made* them.

He rearmed himself from the gun locker in the guardroom, and on the run did a quick check out the rear windows to make sure everything was still clear at the tomb. He cleared the rest of the bottom floor before returning to the archives and dropping beside Aidan on the carnage-strewn floor. Had to shake him awake or out of shock, the toxic bite in his shoulder already getting the better of him.

"Were these Fasad all you saw?" he asked. "Did you see anything more? Feel it?"

Aidan's eyelids fluttered as he tried to focus.

It was possible they'd come alone. Declan desperately wanted to believe they had. But for what reason? They had only slaughtered. They hadn't accomplished anything more than that.

He pressed again. "*Did they come with their Shuankhsen?*"

“No. I don’t think so,” Aidan said. “It was just them. All at once. They were so fast. The alarms didn’t even go off... they were just here.”

He pointed up, then turned his finger down again. As if they must have scaled the walls to break in through the second floor windows and attack from above.

Fast when they needed to be, yes, they were that, but slow when they needed that, instead. He imagined them, with inhuman patience, crawling through the grass in the dark like snakes, so slowly they didn’t even trip any sensors.

To what end, though? They’d killed, then were themselves killed. A simple suicide mission — where was the gain in that? If there was one truth he’d been led to understand about the Fasad, it was that they were creatures their makers turned loose to terrorize. And with two years’ duty in Northern Ireland, he knew terror. Terror *always* had a greater purpose.

So maybe all they’d been was cannon fodder.

Maybe all they’d been was a diversion.



They came for her along the length of this tomb they’d been left to guard — a trio of thrice-killed men from the Bronze Age, subjected to unspeakable rites that hadn’t properly worked. They were the color of tea, and moved unsteadily at first, as though with every step they were remembering how. The one’s attempt at breath — needed, or only a lingering memory? — was unnerving, but the sound of all six feet was worse, the slap and scrape of leathery hide across the limestone floor.

“I’m not the problem, I’m one of you!” Fiona shouted, then pointed toward the door in the direction of the house. “I’m one of them! I’m one of *us*!”

Could they actually see her with those ruined eyes of theirs? Could they hear? Or were they merely driven by the same overriding sense of duty and purpose that drove Kemsiyet and the rest of her kind?

Fiona ran as far as she could get from them and pounded on the steel door, the sound reverberating through the chamber like the beating of an ungodly drum. But no one would come for her in time. The bog-men were halfway up the tomb by now. With nothing to lose, she stabbed her finger at the keypad. Maybe she’d get lucky, hit the right code by pure chance, and if she didn’t, then triggering some booby trap would be a quicker death than being torn apart by what was coming.

But Fate was cruel, and ignored her, neither option her reward.

The same faint sound of scratching and scraping — she noticed it again, then glanced back over her shoulder to see how close they were. But the sound wasn’t even coming from them — she could tell that now. Unless the tomb’s acoustics were playing tricks on her ears, it was coming from the right-side wall. From the other side of the wall.

No. There *couldn't* be anything there, because this sunken tomb was nothing but limestone blocks and, on the other side of those, solid earth that hadn't been disturbed in centuries, maybe millennia.

Turning — the bog-men were turning, veering in the direction of the sound. She had no idea if this was good or bad, only that she didn't seem to be the focus of their attention after all. But more time, more life — she would take it.

The spot on the wall they were homing in on drizzled a trickle of fragments, like dust and powder squeezed out from the inside. Then, of all the impossible things, she saw something protrude through the stone. Through solid limestone.

It was the tip of a finger. Followed by the rest of the hand, and the arm behind it, up to the shoulder, and a leg stepping through to the floor.

The first explanation to occur to her was that she was seeing a ghost, a mindless spirit with no idea it was mired in the earth. But would a ghost come through dripping with clots of soil, and appear as solid as any man? Would a ghost make it look as if the passage had been at least as much of an effort as a deep-sea diver walking through water?

Would a ghost bring with it a near-crippling sensation of dread?

It was one of *them*, of course, one of the Arisen, but nearly everything about this one was wrong. Just to look at him was to know he was something that shouldn't have been, even by their terms. Starting with his ethnicity. The Arisen had all been born of people whose descendants were Egyptian, Nubian, Arab, sub-Saharan African, others. They didn't look like this, thin-faced and blue-eyed and sandy-haired, as Anglo-Saxon as a member of Parliament. None of them would have glared at her the way this one did, as if imagining how she might taste.

Meaning he wasn't one of the Arisen after all, at least not one of those known as the Deathless. This was one of their shadowy inverse, the Lifeless, that even the most powerful of the Arisen feared. Because the Lifeless hunted them. The Lifeless would *eat* them.

She couldn't remember their name — Munchhausen kept getting in the way, and she knew that wasn't right. At the moment, she could recall only that Elsa had told her that, while they were frightening to contemplate, not to worry herself about them. She might go through her entire life here without ever seeing another mummy, let alone one of these abominations.

The bog-men were on him a moment after he was through, vigilant guardians after all. They tore into him, and he tore into them as well. He was faster, and certainly fresher, but there were three of them, and so at first no one had the advantage. All she could do was hope that numbers prevailed, and batter her fist against the door again.

Please, Declan, please —

Then the Lifeless put his fist through one of them, and when he yanked it out again, it came with a thick stew of gobbets like leather and mud that splattered the floor at their feet. He battled his way past them, going for the rear of the tomb,

granting her another reprieve. The bog-men followed, ripping at his back, until he whirled and lashed out with one hand, and tore one's arm free at the shoulder. With a second furious swipe, he peeled another open from one collarbone to the opposite hip, a huge flap of hide opening to unleash the remains of its entrails.

The Lifeless careened past the shelves along the walls in the back half of the outer chamber, raking off their contents into the floor, as if he knew something had to be here, he just hadn't found it yet. Artifacts as old as time, they clattered and scattered, and the more delicate ones broke into fragments and dust.

He was clearly intent on gaining access to the inner chamber. While the bog-men kept him distracted, Fiona rushed deeper into the tomb again, consumed by the terror of following him and doing it anyway. She grabbed the sturdiest relic she saw, an armor breastplate of cast bronze, and rushed back to the door. It made a lot more racket than her fist.

They combatants had made it all the way to the inner chamber, where there were lots of new things to crash. A minute later they emerged again, the Lifeless fighting his way clear of the passage, and by now it was plain he'd got the better of the situation. Torn and tattered, pieces dangling and pieces missing, the bog-men were no longer intact enough to even keep up.

Now... *now* he turned his horrid attention back to her. He'd had priorities, and she was last on the list.

She'd known prayers once, but could no longer remember a single one.

The Lifeless was carrying some sort of box he'd stolen from the inner chamber, obviously archaic, but what around here wasn't? It looked like lacquered wood, or stained with resin — not big, about the size of a small stack of books. He fumbled with its latch, and when he couldn't manage to spring it, his face flickered with wrath so all-consuming it radiated the worst of everything human and animal and meta-physical in one singular visage.

This was the face of evil. Something she'd never truly believed in before.

Impatient, he gouged at the box with his fingers, ripping the latch free of the wood, then grabbing whatever it held and flinging the box aside. He held it cupped in his hand, a lump the size of his fist, and gazed down at it with terrifying reverence.

Every instinct told that, whatever it was, he intended to use it on her.

And Fiona charged. Maybe she was able to take him by surprise because she surprised even herself. She gripped the breastplate with both hands and swung it in a horizontal arc, chopping its edge into his shoulder with a glancing blow into the side of his head. He went reeling to the right and dropped the relic. As it bounced across the floor, she began to follow its path by instinct, until something deeper inside told her no, to not look.

Behind her, the door's latches clanged and it began to open. In her rush to get out, she nearly collided with Declan as he squeezed through the opening. He took all of a second to assess the situation, then snapped the submachine gun to his shoulder

and fired at the Lifeless as he went scrambling after the artifact. Ricochets whined off the floor and walls — this wasn't the place to keep shooting at an agile target so intent on *not* being shot.

The Lifeless snatched up the artifact on the run. In an appalling display of will, he used his free hand to wrench his lower jaw apart with a crack, leaving his oral cavity wide enough to stuff the relic fully inside, encased by his own body. He held his broken jaw closed as he rushed straight at the tomb wall, disappearing through it the same way he'd arrived, as though plunging into a lake.

Gone. And she'd never heard anything so loud as the silence left in his wake.

Declan's hand went to her shoulder, steadying her. "Breathe," he said. "Slow and deep. Breathe."

It was a while before she could do anything else. Then: "What happened here?"

Declan took it all in — the wreckage, the ruined bodies of the tomb's guardians — then stepped further inside, something hollow and demoralized about him now. Whatever he'd seen in the house, it had left a mark. He stooped to gather up the pieces of the wooden box, lying broken at the base of a wall. He fitted the lid back onto the base as if that could fix everything. He held it for a moment, looking down at it, seeing every terrible repercussion it must have meant to him. Then let it drop to the floor again as he spun on his heels and sprinted out the door and up the stairs.

She followed, not wanting to spend another second down in this deathtrap. Up top, she found him stalking the area around the tomb, frantically pivoting this way and that, as if every step was wrong and every turn might be right. He aimed at the ground. His gaze darted from the shadowed groves to the darkened fields beyond.

After several futile moments, he cursed and lowered his gun in disgust. If their monster was clever enough to wade through earth and walk through stone, it would be too cunning to come up again right in front of them.

"Declan? What's just happened here?"

"That thing I told you shouldn't exist, but does?" he said. "It shouldn't ever leave here, and now it has."



CHAPTER THREE

She had followed them for the better part of this bright and sun-drenched day, ever since the middle of the morning. When she first noticed the pair, they'd been in an outdoor café near the top of this hillside town, reveling in a late breakfast of *tiganites* and coffee, and yogurt with thyme honey. It had looked so tempting she'd had to sit a few tables away and have the same for herself.

She was Kemsiyet — Arisen and Deathless — and for this narrow window in time, she could do exactly as she pleased.

Only, now that she'd seen them — the girl, especially — this day was no longer her own. Purpose was always waiting. Even though she hadn't sought it out, Fate had brought her to it.

By now evening was falling, the setting sun torching a red-orange blaze across the rugged hills and the clean white walls of the town and the glittering surface of the sea they called the Mediterranean. A young couple, they were, their years so tender they might have been children but a few blinks of her eyes ago. In a few blinks more, they might be parents with children of their own, worrying about them traveling in strange and foreign lands, and the fates that could befall them there. Another few blinks after this, they might be gray and old, then quietly dead, their ashes scattered by the wind across the waters.

Or they could be dead tonight.

She didn't think she would like that. But it was really up to them. All they had to do was cooperate. All they had to do was give back what was never theirs.



In the time of the First Time, or perhaps before that, the City of Pillars ruled from its place astride the great nourishing river the ancients had called their mother. With the city at its heart, this empire had no name, although there were whispers

that a memory of one for their magnificent city still lived in dreams, and therefore stubbornly continued to survive every attempt to erase it from the face of the earth.

As to why the guilds of sorcerer-priests who ruled with blades and fire and magic were so intent on denying their empire so much as a name, there were whispers about this, as well. To call a thing by its name was to take the first step toward controlling it, or so it was believed. Thus, to go without a name would be to ensure that no challenger or rival could ever get its hand around them. Their destiny would always be their own.

Just as their will would always be worked through their servants.

Yet shackles and lashes and fear went only so far in binding people to their servitude. While compliance may have been easy enough to coerce, loyalty could be a harder prize to win. Worse, servants died. Grew weak and sick and old and then died. They always needed to be replaced, and the new ones always needed to be taught their place in the scheme of things. Sometimes harshly.

But do we not have magic as well as might? realized the guilds of sorcerer-priests called the Shan'iatu. Shouldn't their rites and rituals be stronger and more lasting than the influence of fists? As the Priests of Duat, the Underworld, wasn't power over death itself the greatest prize they sought?

And so need gave rise to invention, with the Rite of Return.



As the pair wandered to and fro throughout the day, Kemsiyet had found them boundlessly fascinating to watch. The boy was tall and thin, with the sparse beginnings of a beard. His dark hair had been slicked back in the morning, until the sun baked the stiffness from it, and it flopped forward again. The girl was slight and waifish, wearing black jeans and a black sleeveless top to show the taut little muscles of her arms. She was often two steps ahead of the boy, eager to see what lay around the next corner.

They kept an unhurried pace. They'd started high in the town, near the peaks of these steep rocky hills by the sea, and worked their way down, following the slow pull of gravity, one man-made cliff at a time. They ate when they wanted to, drank wine when they felt like it, and whenever the mood struck, they would stop and smoke and stare out at the sea. She listened to them when she was close enough, charmed by how they would pick out a boat and make up stories about the tourists or the fishermen aboard it.

They held hands often, kissed freely, and sometimes they ground against each other through their clothes when they thought no one was watching, or didn't care if anyone was. They loved each other, or believed they did, and that was good enough.

She would like to live this way one day, Kemsiyet thought. Someday. Free of the shackles that yanked her up and down through time. No longer a puppet-slave at the end of someone else's strings. Today, at least, she could dwell on this and it did

not feel wrong, an insult to the Judges who sat in control of existence and purpose and the decrees of Fate.

When she wasn't watching the couple, Kemsiyet watched the people of the town, in its shops and cafés, its narrow walkways and skinny docks. She'd been here before, she was certain of that much, even if she didn't know when.

There was something about this sunny land that made her feel, if not at home, at least among people more like herself than not, or whatever she'd once been. The people who lived here, who'd always lived here, were not wealthy. They were people of earth and water and metal and wood. They were people of boats and fishing nets, of hammers and saws, of plantings and harvests. The more powerful of the world, its chieftains and kings, might look down on them, but she knew where true strength lay.

They helped her remember who she might have been, and who she might yet be.

As the sun's western glow darkened to the color of a blood orange, she followed from a distance as the couple went as far as they could go. Beautiful though they were, they were still bags of meat and water, and as water always managed to do, they had found their way to the sea. The boats were in by now, the nets racked and drying, and the docks seemed preternaturally still. To an age-old sound of the slop and splash of water against pilings, they leaned on a railing to watch the end of the day.

After these hours of infinite patience and careful learning, Kemsiyet made her approach.



To sacrifice a servant was not wrong, merely the means of sending her early on her voyage to the Underworld. There her soul would be tested with cutting blades and biting vermin, rending talons and piercing teeth, burning fire and stinging venom and more. Should she prove worthy throughout her tribulations, she would then be so privileged as to stand before the dreaded forty-two Judges of Duat, to endure their scrutiny and ordeals of their own devising. And there, pushed to the edge of oblivion, she would at last find her patron Judge, and decree unto him the truest fold of her five-fold soul.

If she was among those prepared by the Priests of Duat for such honor, she would return to find her body waiting for her — or most of it, that which hadn't been removed and placed in jars — preserved by salts and wrappings, oils and herbs and incantations. Now Deathless, she would join the Arisen in the blessed service of the gods and Judges of Duat.

While empires may be eternal, and unchanging once they have reached their state of perfection, the same could not be said of the world. As the centuries passed, all around them was changing. Other cities rose beneath the falsity of other gods, and each one thought itself an empire, too. The stink of them swept through the land, borne in on the winds from every direction.

But has our magic not grown only more powerful with time? the Shan'iatu realized. If this world no longer suited them, might they not be better off in the next?

And so, in the greatest feat of magic ever conceived or accomplished, they took the City of Pillars from the face of the Earth and into Duat, the Underworld.

There was, sadly, no way to bring it all, every last piece and trace. Already the legacy of the Nameless Empire had begun to disperse throughout the world — not just in the influence of its culture and design, but in the art and artifacts carried and traded beyond its borders. Graven effigies, inscribed texts, powerful amulets, alchemized works of bronze and gold, even relics made of once-living things... all were vessels infused with the life force called Sekhem, forever manipulated by their creators.

What greater ignominy could befall them than being scattered in a world that did not deserve them, and lacked even the capacity to appreciate what they truly were?

What better slaves to retrieve them down through the ages, and naturally return them to Duat, than the Arisen?



At first the young couple was startled by her silent approach, then they relaxed. There was recognition there. Of course they'd seen her earlier, when she had wanted to be seen. Of course they'd wondered who she was.

Kemsiyet pointed at the pendant around the girl's neck, dangling from a thin leather cord.

"That's a beautiful piece you wear." She'd heard them speaking English earlier, their voices North American. Her kind had always had a gift for language. She called up just enough of an unidentifiable accent to seem as exotic to their ears as she was to their eyes. "Where did you acquire it?"

"This clunky thing?" The girl seemed flattered to have been asked. "I found it in a shop a few weeks ago in Amsterdam. You know the kind of place where if you see something you like, you better grab it now, because you know you'll never see it again? One of those."

"It looks very old."

"I don't know about that. It was cheap enough. I think it's just made to look that way. It'd be nice to think so, though."

"You might be surprised," Kemsiyet told her. "Some things can float through the world, and even when they're close enough to touch, you have no idea of the history they have."

It was cast from metal, tarnished by time, but whole. It resembled an ankh, but simpler, the design that would one day *become* what the world knew as an ankh. Its arms were of a single width, so they didn't flare out from the center; instead of a loop, the top was a simple circle. On the flat juncture just beneath the circle, the artisan had engraved, with precision and care, a tiny scorpion, all but rubbed away.

It had been a staggeringly long time since she'd seen one... and the moment she first saw this one at mid-morning, she *knew*. It fairly pulsed with Sekhem, the same life force that flowed through her.

"May I?" She reached out to touch it, and thrilled to that first contact with her fingertips.

By now, like worms starting to nibble beneath the skin, the unease was starting to work its way into them. They knew something was different about her, only they didn't know what, and were such babies they could never have guessed how easily she could destroy them.

The boy, especially, had been staring over the girl's shoulder to regard her with naked interest. He couldn't help it, being drawn to something that could be the end of him. They often were, at that age.

And what did they see? A shapely woman who carried herself with such confidence and authority that she seemed taller than she really was. Her black hair was bound into a single braid, as thick as a serpent, that coiled around one shoulder. Her features were like clean lines pressed out of smooth brown clay, her skin so supple and moist and flawless it seemed to glow with health.

But while it may have fooled their eyes and fingers alike, it wasn't skin at all. It too was Sekhem, the life force congealed around her in a perfect memory of what she had once been, a shell her kind called a sahu.

She smiled at them, and gave them time to wonder if maybe they should ask her to leave, or do so themselves. She touched the pendant again.

"May I have it? Would you give it to me?"

"Hey," the boy said, annoyed now. "Where do you get off?"

They were close enough to not only touch her, but smell her, as well. Did they? If so, she would be sweet upon the nose, not in the way of cheap fragrances squirted into bottles, but in the way of herbs, dried and perfumed — as she was inside, so she exuded outwardly — with just enough touch of bitterness to keep the scent from being cloying.

"I could purchase it," she said. Then her voice, though still soft, turned harsh. "Or I could take it. And if you then tried to be as foolish as your years allow you to be, I could feed you to the things in the sea that are too clever to be caught in nets."

They were in deep waters already, and knew it. Eyes never lied.

"But it would be better as a gift, freely given," she said, gently now. "Then I will give you one in return."

The boy thought he knew what she meant, or hoped he did — an idiot, but a harmless one. The longer the girl looked at her, though, the more enthralled she grew. Her head tilted a bit to one side. Her dark-rimmed eyes, at first narrowed in scrutiny, relaxed and widened. A crease in her brow erased, and her lips parted as if

she longed to say something but knew in her heart that no words would be worthy of the moment.

Kemsiyet had seen faces go like this before. If she whispered the deepest truth of herself, even a hint of it, the girl might follow her anywhere.

Another time, maybe. Another life.

The girl brought her hand to her chest and caressed the pendant with a nod, then gave a glance of reassurance back to the boy. “It *should* be a gift.”

She lifted it from around her neck and, as Kemsiyet tipped her head forward, turned it over, freely given, and proved herself in some tiny way the master of her fate. Kemsiyet laid her hand over the pendant and pressed it over her heart — despite all that the priests had taken from her eons ago, they’d left her with that much. She felt not only the currents of life force that hummed through it, but saw glimpses of times and places it had been, and the people who’d worn it, none more clear at the moment than this child who had just surrendered it.

And she knew what the girl had been running from for years.

With this hand that could be terrible, she chose to be tender, and cupped the girl’s head to draw her close. Kemsiyet leaned in, lips at her ear, with a whisper just between them.

“I know what your father did to you, and I hear what he told you, but he was wrong. There never was a time or a place that it was right,” she murmured, and then a little more, then one last bit of counsel that would make the most difference, once it sank in and did its healing work over time. With a kiss to the girl’s cheek, she drew back. “*That* is my gift to you.”

She sent them on their way then, suggesting very strongly they should leave, because she sensed that the boy, who still hoped that something else altogether was going on here, was about to say something very stupid. As they scurried along the docks, every few steps the girl turned her head for another peek back, as if she couldn’t make sense of anything at the moment, neither who nor what nor how nor why.

Let her wonder. Wonder would help, too.



Every Descent back into life was different, even if every awakening was the same.

Awakening always meant confusion, sometimes violence. She would have no idea who she was, only the wondrous and terrible things she was capable of. She would lack any notion of what she herself might want, only the purpose imposed upon her from outside. It might be that she’d been summoned by the cult that served her. Or it might be that a plundering intruder had found her tomb, his life’s last mistake.

Or, the rarest — this was only the fourth occasion in more than six millennia of deathlessness — she might awaken for no urgent reason at all. If there was one thing she could count on across time, it was the summons with no human agency behind it. Rather, it was another revolution of the Sothic Wheel. Every 1461 years, the star Sothis swung around again to its place in the dawn sky, and she gladly answered its call.

And for another sliver of eternity, her time and life could be her own again.



Before long, the sun was gone, taking every stroke of color with it. The wheel of the day had turned, leaving Kemsiyet alone with the night and the restless sea.

That was me, she thought of her gift to the girl. That was the truest part of me.

It couldn't be wrong to want to be free, even if only once every 1461 years.

When the moon was high, the contraption in her handbag went off, trilling like a sick bird — the phone they had given her before she left for Greece. She pressed the right button and put it to her ear.

“Yes?” she said.

“It's me, Mum. It's Declan,” came the voice from across the miles. “I'm afraid you're needed back here.”



The men of the Ta'alun had ridden and climbed most of the night to give them the vantage point, and advantage, they now enjoyed.

By the light and blessings of the moon, they had found their quarry, then veered off to the northeast to continue riding parallel to the hills this pitiful tribe used to shield itself from the dangers of the world. When M'kaal and his men had first left home, the moon was black. Now it was round and bright again, and had swung halfway across the sky before the pair of scouts sent ahead found for them a smooth trail washed out by some stream that no longer flowed. They arrayed themselves into a single, well-spaced column, M'kaal at the head of it, and made the serpentine climb to the crest of the hills. They then backtracked until the valley rolled away on the other side, and the scattered fires left burning through the night let him know: They'd found their quarry again, and were now above them.

They had slept a little then, taking turns while waiting for the dawn, their horses hobbled just downslope, out of sight from the other side. By the time the sun rose in a blaze of pink and orange, as though the entire sky had flowered, M'kaal and his men were awake and fed and flat on their bellies, peering over the ridge to see what else daybreak might reveal.

They were herdsmen down there — goats, mostly. He noted a network of pens, and two wells ringed with rock, and huts that looked made of mud slathered over walls of woven sticks. The place would fall easily. It was barely standing as it was.

“I guess fifty,” said D’jaal, the only brother his mother had given him who’d lived to manhood, and who was never far from his side. “Sixty, maybe.”

“Sixty it is.” M’kaal clapped him on the forearm. “And if there are any more than that, you get to take them all on by yourself.”

Soon, down below, the village began to stir, shapes and shadows lit by the flaring of rekindled fires, greeted by the squalling of goats. As the early light began to reveal more of the terrain, M’kaal plotted their paths down. Two columns of riders, one to the left, *there*, down that unobstructed wash; another to the right. Footmen down the middle, wild and screaming.

If this land had a name, he’d never heard it. If these people had a name, they had done nothing to make it known beyond themselves. He watched them wake, and cast a prayer to the winds and the sky and the earth, and the gods that called them home, to give thanks for what these people were soon to become.

He’d seen enough.

M’kaal and the men of the Ta’alun slipped back down the hill to their horses. In another few moments they were over it, thundering down the other side to the valley below. Nearly a hundred strong, they swept across the grassy plain, banging spears together along the way and shouting like spirits who’d come for blood and vengeance.

There was no better time for such a raid than daybreak. It crushed the heart of its targets before you ever reached them. Some wouldn’t even be awake yet. The rest would have met the new day with relief they’d made it safely through another night, that those things that prowled the darkness had left them alone.

No one ever dreamed it was the dawn they had to fear.

It all was part of M’kaal’s greater strategy. The Ta’alun people had no wish to destroy. They had no desire to burn. They had no lust to kill. They wanted only to take.

Although, in order to take, a little killing always became necessary.

At least a dozen of the herdsmen snatched up crude spears and clubs to fend the raiders off. Three of them had to die, learning what *real* spears were, before the others broke and ran. Another two responded with slings — one of them with hopeless aim, but the other was formidable, so he too had to earn a javelin for his skills.

It was over quickly, and then M’kaal sent his swiftest riders to sweep out past the far side of the village and round up the more nimble-footed ones who thought they could outrun the men of the Ta’alun. Soon they were all clustered in the heart of the

settlement, the nameless people of a nameless land, ringed by men on horseback and destined for something so much better. They wept and clutched their children close. Some looked as dazed as if they'd stared too hard into the eye of the sun. Others dropped to their knees, because whatever differences in the tongues they spoke, there was no one alive who did not know the language of begging.

And when M'kaal swung down from his mount, the good earth under his feet again, had they ever seen the like of him before? He doubted it. His years were eight-and-twenty, a warrior-shaman in his prime who stood a head taller than most of them. Even with the bulk of his fur jacket and hide armor, he was lean and angular, long of face and of limb. His hair was deepest black and, unbound, hung in tangles to his chest.

Had they ever seen a man of his age who kept his cheeks and jaw shaved clean and smooth? Their men were dirty and bearded, because they did not know the way of things. But this much could be corrected. A beard hid a man's face from the gods, a shield behind which he might attempt to hide his guile and his weakness and the unspoken desires of his heart.

In his full and unmarred splendor, then, M'kaal stood before them and let them see exactly what was on his face — a face he would always be proud to reveal to any god — and they looked away in fear.

Through a series of gestures he'd refined among all those other nameless people in nameless lands who'd come before, he made them understand that he wished to see their headman. He'd never found a tribe, however small, without one. At last, one of them stepped forward, burly and big-bellied, his beard and unruly hair more gray than black, and something behind his eyes that needed snuffing out. They'd chosen well.

M'kaal circled him once, slowly, with appraisal, then from the headman's left stomped a sharp kick into the side of his knee that dropped him to the ground. He then snatched his war club from his horse. It was a fearsome thing, made of hardwood but light, shaped much like the paddles they used for their reed boats on the Great Mother River back home. Its edge was studded with teeth pried from the long, snapping jaws of the huge lizards that sometimes swam up from the south.

As the headman knelt in pain, struggling to stand again, M'kaal swung the club as hard as he could, aiming for the side of the headman's neck. It had been a long time since he'd needed more than one blow. It was over quickly, the club ripping through the headman's neck like a saw, and it made a terrific mess, and if these people harbored any lingering doubts as to who was in charge, he drowned them in the great gush of blood.

As they wept and wailed to mourn their dead, he called forth one of the men of the Ta'alun, the one they called the Servant of Tongues, and let him

work his magic. It was in the herbs he burned, and the song that he sang, and the rhythms of the rattle that he shook. Even among desolate plains and rocky hills such as this, the land heard everything, and remembered, and recorded it as surely as if it were marks scratched on a tablet of wet clay. The Servant of Tongues only had to find it, stir it up, and listen from his heart until he knew their tongue and aligned it with his own.

Whenever the Servant's eyes rolled back until only the whites were showing, that was when he was ready.

"You see this as a day of sorrow. You see this as a day of horror," M'kaal called out to them, addressing the villagers as the Servant of Tongues relayed his foreign words in words they could understand. "You see this as a day in which you have lost everything you have ever known. But I see more than you can. I see farther than your eyes are able."

They glanced among themselves, these people of the dirt, in every shade of confusion, every shade of fear.

"I see a people who have been chosen," he went on. "I see a people who have been lifted from the dust of the earth, and who will soon become a part of something greater than they are... something greater than they ever could have imagined." He let his club dangle from one arm while lifting his other hand to the sky, to the fading white disc of the moon that still shone opposite the rising sun. "By the time the moon has gone black again, you will see wonders. You will struggle to understand how men and women could build such things, how they could even conceive of them. But soon, you will know even that much. Because you will be building them yourselves."

He left them to the others, the men of the Ta'alun coming forward to line them up and bind their wrists together, then lash the bindings to the long ropes they would share. There would be times along the way when, like lambs who knew no better, they would be tempted to stray. It would take them awhile to understand their fate.

He found D'jaal, his brother, and pulled him aside, because binding wrists was work that any of them could do.

"When I struck the headman down, I sought your eyes," M'kaal said, very quietly. "But I couldn't find them."

D'jaal had eyes only for the ground now. They were kinder, his eyes, and his hair was lighter, and his years were but one-and-twenty. He still had a lot to learn.

"You've looked away for the last time," M'kaal told him. "I don't want to see you look away ever again. It will fall on you to do this someday, and you can't do it if you're not used to it. You can't do it if you don't know what it looks like." He pushed D'jaal's chin up so they were eye-to-eye. "Do you think it cruel?"

“No matter what his years, he looked like a strong worker. He might have been glad to become one, if he was only given the chance.”

“The chance I gave him was to lead his people one last time. When I do this, it isn’t cruelty. It’s mercy. It’s mercy wearing a different mask, but still mercy underneath, for the rest of them.” M’kaal gestured at the people lined up and submitting to their bonds. “We come, and there’s resistance in their hearts, they can’t help it. The gods put it in us, and Fate brings us to the times when we feel it stir inside. They felt it. But then... this man who’s led them, who has commanded their respect... when they see how easily he falls, their resistance falls, too. When they see how with one stroke of the club he’s gone, it saves the rest of them. They give up. They give in. And that is how cruelty becomes mercy.”

He embraced his brother, then left him to ponder these necessities of life while M’kaal saw to everyone and everything else. After the horses were watered and stores for the return trip gathered and secured, they set off with the sun behind them, west now, and a little south. The goats followed along, bringing up the rear.

And Fate was with them.

They had plenty of rope left, he was glad to see. If they were still there on the way home, there were a couple of nomadic tribes they’d spotted along the way out that they could sweep up on their return.



CHAPTER FOUR

In the aftermath of the attack on the manor house, Fiona couldn't think of anyplace that would have felt right to be. She didn't want to stay here. Didn't want to go home. And the last thing she wanted was to go running into the night, because no telling what else might have been out there, watching and waiting.

The house was an abattoir — she knew that, and wished to see none of it. Until Declan told her about Aidan, how he'd gone down and wouldn't be getting up again. Then there was no choice. Only the most selfish kind of coward would let someone die alone because she didn't want to see the rest.

Even if it *was* a war zone reduced to a microcosm of hallways and rooms.

Aidan smiled when he saw her — a goofy-looking fellow, she'd always thought, but he had skills and a good heart. He wouldn't have been here otherwise. She knelt in the floor next to him, trying not to look at the surrounding carnage, the bodies and the pieces of bodies, the blood. Avoiding a good look at the hideous bite wound in his shoulder was harder. It was so close, after all, to his eyes.

Fiona told him she was sorry. Asked if there was anything she could do, now or ever. She held his hand. Stroked the creases from his brow. It would have to be enough.

When Declan came back in from wherever he'd disappeared to these past couple of minutes, he handed Aidan a tiny glassine envelope. At first she objected — cyanide, really? Did it have to be so decisive, so coldly calculated?

"It's okay," Aidan whispered to her. "There's two ways this happens. The pill is better."

He stuck around another quarter-hour. A few jokes, a few prayers, a few fears. Then he nodded, ready to go, and popped the capsule into his mouth, crunched it between his teeth. After a few shuddering tremors that she would never forget for as long as she lived, it was done.

Out of here. She wanted out of here.

Fortunately, some rooms had escaped the fray, and Declan got her settled in a corner study that was still intact and untouched. The smell pervaded, regardless — blood and smoke and rot and fear. He found incense to burn, and that helped. He draped a blanket around her, because with that chill gripping her, it seemed likely she'd gone into shock. While he made phone calls, he warmed some chicken broth in a mug, then kept her company while she got that down her.

“Making sure something bad doesn't happen. That's what you said we were about here. But it did,” she whispered. Her head didn't feel attached, just some balloon adrift on thermal currents. “I don't even know what it was about. I don't even know why.”

“What you saw down in the tomb was called a Shuankhsen,” Declan said. “Turlough could've done a better job telling you what they are and what they're about, but you'll have to make do with me. They were created by the same ancient priests and sorcerers who made the Arisen, but for a different reason. Under different circumstances. As to how, and what happened, let's stick a pin in that and leave it for another time. I don't think you're up to hearing it right now.”

*God, it **must** be bad, she thought. And he's probably right.*

“Let's just say that what came out of it was a bug, not a feature. They rise and resurrect, same as *her* kind, but only in stolen bodies. If there's a shadow side to life and existence, pure and real and solid, with intent behind it... and by this point I've got no reason to think there isn't... the Shuankhsen are completely lost to it. The ultimate nihilists, they are. They've been called the enemies of all life on earth, and that's not wrong. No hype, no exaggeration. *All* life.”

She sipped her broth, for the warmth more than anything. How were you supposed to react when you realized you shared the world, the universe, with entities you wished you'd never known about? She'd never been a fan of blind ignorance, but maybe it was time to reconsider.

Oh. Right. Too late.

“How did he even get in down there?”

“It's a spell, same as with the others. Shuankhsen can learn them too, use them just as well. If they know that one, they can move through anything solid that's of the earth — soil, stone, like that — as easy as you or I could move through water. My guess is that's why he jammed that relic in his gob. He thought he wouldn't have been able to get it through the wall if it was in his hand.”

“What did he take? What's so important about it that it should cause all this?”

“What I was telling you about earlier? Got loose from Irem, came up across the continent, used but used badly? It's known as the Blasphemous Depiction. You could call it a sculpture, but that doesn't do it justice. Sculpture, that's a surface description. This thing goes deep. It's made of some kind of metal. Kemsiyet thinks it's from a meteorite.

“Whoever made it,” Declan went on, “that’s a name lost to history. By design. Turlough had a papyrus from Egypt’s Fourth Dynasty that refers to it, and the lengths they went to in Irem to delete the person from memory. Sliced from texts, chiseled off inscriptions in stone, that sort of thing. It was a sacrilege of the highest order, done by someone who didn’t just conceive of doing the unthinkable... they had the skills and the will to actually pull it off.”

She tugged the blanket tighter around her shoulders. “A sculpture of what?”

“It’s a depiction of what couldn’t be depicted,” he said. “I know you’d know of the Judges. But do you remember the Final Judge? Arem-Abfu, they call him.”

Hesitant, she nodded anyway. “He’s the really scary one, right?”

“He judges the worst of the worst. He judges the perpetrators of the greatest evils. Crimes against humanity, those are nothing to him. Crimes against the very cosmos, *that’s* his domain. Even if you weren’t on his bad side, and you were to find yourself in the Underworld and pledge service to him, he’d still only appear in your mind, because you couldn’t bear the actual sight of him. His face, and what’s behind it, they’re so terrible that to look at him would break you. Permanently. And the Blasphemous Depiction, well... for reasons no one will ever know, some mad twat thousands of years ago thought it would be a good idea to do his portrait.”

She remembered the moment it went bouncing across the tomb floor. “I didn’t look at it. Something inside told me not to. Like it *repelled* me. Why?”

“Self-preservation instincts, maybe? You were already in a state,” he said. “Are you up on your Lovecraft?”

She blinked. This couldn’t be as rudely intrusive as it sounded. “I’m sorry... ?”

“H.P. Lovecraft. He was a writer from the 1920s, 1930s. He was big on tentacles and words like *eldritch*. Weird stuff, but it’s got a potency. He denied it, but all along, people have thought he was tapping into realities that might exist on some level. I don’t know about that, but one thing he said definitely hits home: ‘The most merciful thing in the world is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents.’ So keep that principle in mind.”

She dipped her face over the mug, breathing in the warmth of the broth. The cosmos seemed very cold right now. You took your warmth where you could find it.

“Right now, you and me, we’re only aware of a tiny fraction of what’s going on around us,” Declan said. “Even as quiet as it is, there’s so much going on in this room that if we tried to take it all in at once, we’d be overwhelmed. We see only a fraction of the light spectrum. We hear only a slice of the audio frequency range. We’ve got no reason to focus on the refrigerator’s hum from the kitchen or a mouse moving in the walls or the fluctuations of starlight through the planet’s atmosphere. We’ve got filters in place, for our own good. Couldn’t function if we didn’t. There’s a theory that what schizophrenia is, is when a person’s filters start to break down. What the Blasphemous Depiction does is tear the filters apart altogether.”

But that wasn’t all, was it? Because, hey, bog-men, right?

“It raises the dead, too,” Fiona said. “Doesn’t it.”

“More or less. If you’re in possession of it, and you’ve got yourself a spirit and got yourself a dead body, you have the power to put the two together.”

And now it was in the hands of an enemy of all life on earth. In her hands, the mug was losing heat, turning lukewarm. “Why leave something like that in this world at all? Why not send it back where it came from? Back to the Underworld. *She* can do that.”

Declan shook his head. “But she won’t. She hasn’t been consistent about why not. It’s in the archives. One time she’ll say it’s such an affront to them they refuse to take it back. Another time, it’s because she doesn’t want to try, to risk the consequences of what would happen to her... how the Judges might react when *this* is what she has for them.”

So she’d chosen to guard it. Century by century, millennium after millennium. Until such time as the forces that controlled her existence relented and took it back, or she decided she no longer cared about the consequences to her. Mortal allies came and went, but she went on. Kemsiyet went on — and in this much, at least, she would have been set apart even from her fellow Arisen. It seemed an appallingly lonely existence.

And that was the missing piece here.

“It should’ve been a secret,” Fiona said. “All this time, it must have been. How did the secret get out, then?”

Declan wore a grim look getting worse. “That’s what I need to get sorted. With this particular relic, this effigy, the cult — yeah, I’m using the word — we only ever thought it would have to be guarded from other people. That human fucking beings would be the only ones stupid enough to try and steal it. The other Arisen, they know exactly what they’d be dealing with, and the stigma attached to it. There’s not a one of them who’d want anything to do with it. Not a one of them who’d let *their* cult get mixed up with it. Even the Shuankhsen, on the whole, are fairly horrified the thing was made. *Them*. As much as anything, that should let you know the degree of abhorrence for it. So, this Shuankhsen, there’s something different about him. I need to get that figured out as soon as I can, before *she* gets back.”

Fiona could see it in his eyes, and dreaded the thought: “You’re leaving, aren’t you.”

“I need to go to London.” He pointed deeper into the house. “One of the Fasad I killed... I recognized him. Or the bloke he used to be. Fasad aren’t born, they’re made, and you’ve come face-to-face with who did the making. The one I recognized, London’s where he should’ve been. Something happened there, before it ever got to here.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“Not long, I hope.” Worse was coming, though. That, too, was in Declan’s eyes. “There’s something else you need to know. Earlier, on the phone? I couldn’t raise

anyone else. Nobody. I think this was the last stop for that crew, and they'd already taken care of everybody else before they got here. We're it."

Sole survivors. She let the news sink in, then realized it was already there. She'd expected as much, just hadn't admitted it to herself yet.

"Then I'm going with you...?" She wasn't sure who she was asking.

"If that's what you want, I won't try talking you out of it," he said. "Your choice, though. I did get one call through. There's some people coming, probably not before morning. Soon as they can get down from Dublin. It's an old arrangement, in place if it was ever needed. Discreet people. They're going to burn what needs burning and bury who needs burying. Prejudice for the one, respect for the other. You can stay here and see to that, if you like."

No. She would rather help. Everyone here was beyond it. Let the dead bury the dead, and all that.

"Then I'm going with you."



They rose up out of the mists and frost, then came south to escape the worst of the floods. It was all he knew of his people, from the times before lines and lineages were chanted, a time before songs of heroes were sung. It was all he needed to know.

The legends of the time before, of their life in the north, were too terrifying to not be true. The world was cold and dry then, and the legends told of ice everywhere, great towering walls of it, mountains of it, marking the points beyond which no one, no matter how brave, could go.

Year upon year, generation upon generation, there was a balance in it... until the people began to lose their land a little at a time, season by season. The air promised more warmth, but with it, rivers deepened and grew swifter. They climbed their banks to wash away whatever was built near them, or cut new banks so that everything fell in and was carried off all at once. The Northern Sea did likewise, expanding like a bowl filled to overflowing, swallowing the trees that grew alongside it, then spreading out for more. Hilltops became islands, and islands disappeared.

But this was not the worst. Anyone could outrun a trickle.

The worst of it came, the legends said, with little warning. From the north there would resound a crack like thunder on a clear blue day, then a roar as if the world's winds had decided all together to howl in torment. That was how they knew: Another wall of ice had collapsed to send a savage torrent sweeping over the land, numbing cold and carrying with it slabs of ice and boulders as big as the canopies of trees.

And each time, a little more of the world drowned.

But not everything, nor everyone.

They must have been a hardy people to survive, these distant ancestors of the Ta'alun, and that they had done so was the greatest sanction he could think of for their descendants' dominion over the world.

So look upon our works, you lowly, and do not despair, but instead rejoice, that you are now a part of them.

M'kaal had told them the truth, these nameless people of the rugged hills, and once they'd seen it for themselves, with their own eyes, how could they ever doubt again? They were a fortunate people, delivered by Fate to be joined to something so much greater than the mean and meager lives of dirt they'd known before.

Could they ever have imagined waters as broad and nourishing as those of the Great Mother River? Could they ever have envisioned fields so lush and fertile? Was it in them to anticipate harvests of such bounty, and did they even know the numbers that would let them count all the ovens baking so many loaves? Could they ever have believed that people gathered in such numbers, as plentiful as the ants in a nest?

They could now.

Were their wildest dreams capable of showing them the towers that greeted them on their arrival — the ziggurats of mud-brick that rose like hills designed and built wherever they were wanted and needed? Could they ever have imagined sturdy walls and sound roofs? Could they ever have conceived of bright and whitewashed temples?

And did they feel around them, as present as the wind and rain, the vibrant flow of magic waiting to be channeled?

They *would* now.

And once he'd delivered them to their new home, M'kaal returned to his own. He embraced his wives, Kita and Myrya, and kissed the babies they'd born him. He bathed away the dust and sweat. Still wet from the river, he let Kita comb the tangles from his hair, and Myrya rub him with perfumed oil, so that he could once more sleep on his bed of rushes and blankets, like a civilized man.

The next morning a runner was sent to fetch him and bring him to Karnuth — first among the council of shamans who ruled over the land of the Ta'alun, and so first among all civilized people. He was older than M'kaal by twenty years, his warrior days behind him, with the wisdom it had brought him, and now Karnuth was Father to them all. Just as his own father had been before him and, the gods permitting, his eldest son would be once Karnuth found his way to the Underworld.

The runner took M'kaal to meet him in a corner atop one of their northernmost towers, where Karnuth stood gazing into the vibrant green vistas that sprawled away from them. Had men's feet ever been planted so firmly, so high above the ground?

To the west, slaves chopped straw to mix with mud, to be packed into molds and baked into bricks. Already they were up to the third tier of the newest ziggurat rising in honor of the gods and the glory of the Ta'alun.

To the north, far beyond, slaves dragged sledges of quarried rock to be added to the great dam that, since times before knowing, had protected them from the floods that might still, without warning, sweep down from the north. It was not a dam meant for holding water back, only diverting the worst of such a deluge away from all they had built.

His entire life, he'd never seen it needed.

"Over a hundred more, I hear you brought us," Karnuth said, and embraced him like a favored son. "You do us honor. You bring us glory."

Stones and sledges, sledges and stones. And slaves who fell, to be replaced by others. Even though the dam had stood unneeded for generations, it was unthinkable to consider reversing the process, taking it down and putting the stones to other uses. The gods, for one thing, might take this as a challenge. Might suddenly see the Ta'alun as a people so bloated with arrogance and hubris they thought they could do away with the very shield the gods had inspired them to build in the first place.

Do that, and the cold north floods would be sure to come again. All his people's great works might wash away with them.

Each year the Great Mother River would flood up from the south, but they lived with this and welcomed it for the fertility it bestowed upon their fields. The memories of the cold floods from the north brought only terror. And so the dam would stand forever, and if it was never needed again, then let it stand as a monument to their will to endure.

"But another hundred isn't enough. Not anymore," Karnuth said. "The cost it has begun to worry me. It grows greater every year. Your war band... the others... you all have to roam farther out each time."

"These are journeys I'm willing to make," M'kaal said. "I revel in making them. They're how I serve best."

Karnuth held up a hand to quiet him. For all the lives he'd taken in his youth, in his elder status he was a kindly looking man. His hair was a soft gray, drawn far back from his brow. His eyes were all the more prominent for it, brown of hue, set amid skin left crinkled by squinting into thousands of risen suns, thousands of ritual fires, and full of wisdom now, full of patience and understanding.

“It isn’t your commitment that concerns me,” Karnuth went on. “It’s the distance we’re forced to go now, and the time it takes us. It’s the wisdom of dividing us for so long, and how far you are from help if you ever needed it. This latest journey you’ve completed, going there and back took you the entire cycle of the moon. It will only get worse. It will only take longer to find more people and bring them back. The ground we’ve already picked over within a few days’ ride isn’t going to spring up with new ones for us to harvest, and their children don’t grow fast enough to keep up with the need.”

“Then what other options do we have?”

“Two. The council spoke of them while you were gone. Perhaps they can be used together. Perhaps not.”

Maybe, Karnuth explained, the time had come to progress beyond traveling overland. To go by water would be swifter. They had a river, did they not? And did the river not flow into the Northern Sea? It could carry them there in less than two days, and from its mouth, they could reach a great many tribes and settlements that flocked along the shores of the sea. All they needed was reed boats that could sail it... and these they had already. They would simply have to start building them bigger, a fleet of boats and barges large enough to carry back slaves in sufficient numbers to make the trips worthwhile.

And the other option? He knew before Karnuth could tell him.

“Alliances,” M’kaal said. “Making allies of people rather than conquering them.”

“We’ve spoken of it for years.”

“And the reason it has never gone beyond talk is that you always end up arguing yourself out of it. Your words, Father: ‘Even though we bring it to them as strength and freedom, they will still see it as servitude. They will never agree to it in peace.’ Your very words. What has changed?”

“Our willingness to share. To loosen our grasp a little.” Karnuth’s eyes lit with vision. “All we know, all we have... what would lesser people give to possess a small portion of it? Would they send us their strongest sons and daughters for a time? Would they give their backs for it, if they knew we would send them home richer and wiser for it? I think they would.”

It was true. The Ta’alun had much more to offer lesser people than the tip of a spear or the edge of a club. There were trade goods, things of beauty and things of daily use that shepherds and herdsman and fishermen would covet once they’d touched them.

What else? There were teachings they could share, everything from tending soil and seeds, to using the stars at night for travel. Building boats and breeding animals for greater vigor. These, too, would be prized. And while every tribe no doubt had its own gods, surely they would welcome the opportunity to learn

about the real ones. Such people might someday even be worthy of being taught the mysteries and wonders of the soul, its levels and its layers.

As of the last few moons, there were even secrets Karnuth had divined but shared with no one else but M'kaal, his favored among the council, because it was not yet time for the rest to know such things. It would be like entrusting fire to dogs. No one had come back from the spirit world with greater knowledge: that every soul had a True Name that unlocked its deeper understanding... and, Karnuth suspected, enabled its control.

So yes, they had much to give the world.

But the world would have to earn it.

"You leave out one thing," M'kaal said. "You speak only of going north, and west and east. You say nothing of the south."

Karnuth looked at him with the patience he might show an impetuous boy. "Because we still don't know enough about the south."

From their corner atop the tower, they turned as if the other side of the world had called to them. The Great Mother River flowed toward them now, instead of rolling away. It stretched as wide as any river dared, a vast ribbon reflecting the sky, back and back and back into the southern horizon, past the point even the sharpest eyes could follow. How far did south go? No one knew. But their river was a mighty one. It must come from a mighty land.

"No scouts have ever come back," Karnuth reminded him.

"Then send more." M'kaal didn't mean to sound as angry as he did. "Send more, until they do."

It was common wisdom, that until anyone returned to tell them different, they could only conclude that the south was a land of terrible peril, that it would devour whoever they sent it.

Although, for all he knew, common wisdom was a fool's trap laid by the gods to see who would let themselves be snared by it.

"Send more," he said again, gently now, with respect. "No one ever won glory by being afraid of bigger mouths."

Karnuth smiled and clutched him by the forearms, and if anything needed to be forgiven, it was. "Justly said."

"Send *me*."

"No. Oh, no," Karnuth said, and made even disappointment sound kind. "Your path remains here. Soon, it will be time for you to stable your horse and learn how to make your way on water."



CHAPTER FIVE

The quickest they could island-hop wasn't quick enough to suit him, but it was all they had unless he wanted to give swimming to Wales a go. Declan booked the pair of flights from Waterford to London Luton for 7:15 the next morning, with a rental car on arrival, and settled in to pass the duration in this houseful of casualties.

He told Fiona to get some sleep if she could, that he'd stand watch, and not to worry anyway, because he couldn't imagine another attack. No reason for it. They'd got what they'd come for.

Staying put and waiting for the most expedient trip may have been the smart thing logistically, but in every other way it was the worst thing for him. Movement meant distractions. No movement, no distraction. *That's it, Declan, sit right there, think on how it all went wrong. Think of what you could've done to stop the situation before it got that far. Think how much worse things could get with that abomination loose in the world.*

At least when the shakes took hold, his entire body trying to purge everything that had happened, he was in the next room, and pretty sure Fiona was asleep, so she wouldn't have to see him lose it and have whatever faith she might've had left in him eroded that much further.

She was handling it well. He'd seen trained soldiers snap and unravel at much less.

He woke her in the small hours for the drive down to the airport. The weariness hit him worst at dawn, but at least they were moving again, finally getting something done, even if it was just covering miles.

He thought he might finally catch some sleep on the plane, even if it was a short flight, under an hour and a half, but it wasn't happening. He must have tossed and turned one too many times because Fiona couldn't help but notice that his closed eyes didn't mean a thing.

“If it helps you settle and ease your mind,” she said, “I don’t really think you’re a thug.”

He snort-laughed. Imagine that. “Sorry about the neck.”

“You’re forgiven.”

Next thing he knew, they were touching down at Luton.



It was early afternoon by the time he got them down the M1 into the snarled thicket of London, and wheeled the rental Audi up near the house on the Camden side of Regent’s Park. He knew the area already, from visits to the Lock Market and, more to the point, a trip lasting several days a few years ago, when he was new to it all. A trip to this very mansion.

A few streets away, an uneasy dynamic was playing out along rows of big blocky Georgian houses whose older owners wanted to maintain a swanky grandeur against an incoming tide of bohemians flush with new cash and a need to put their own stamp on things. The cult of the Arisen known as Banefre may have been a stealthier fit with the latter, but here on Prince Albert Road they were really hiding in plain sight. They could afford it.

There was new money, old money, *old* old money, and then there was cult money. Time did the heavy lifting. All you had to do was start several centuries ago with a modestly healthy sum, then let the compound interest build up. On paper, it could be made to look like family holdings and corporations, and no one a mummy couldn’t outlive ever need be any the wiser. A few checks and balances to discourage embezzlement, and there you had it: a self-sustaining fortune.

Even for the rich, space and privacy were the hardest premiums to come by in London, but here they had just enough of it to manage. Neighbors and passers-by would have no reason to suspect anything unusual going on there. Three sheer-walled stories high, the house sat a few moments’ jog back from the sidewalk behind an encircling brick wall. It overlooked the groves and green fields of the park, so there were no facing neighbors. Hedges and trees did the rest, birch and maple and a conical evergreen towering nearly as high as the roofline.

They spent a few minutes out on the sidewalk watching for signs of life or movement. Nothing — they might be waiting all day, and if things had gone seriously bad here, far longer than that. Set into the middle of the wall was a door, black wrought iron with a heavy screen welded over it, and next to that, recessed into the bricks, an intercom panel. The call button went unanswered. Declan tried his luck with the door, but as he expected, the knob was locked.

“Be ready,” he told Fiona.

After a glance up and down the street, he leaped up and grabbed the top of the bricks to hoist himself over and plop down on the other side. Never get away with

that in a place like Kensington Park Gardens, but here they didn't go as far as to hire street guards. When he tried the door from this side, it opened right up, and Fiona slid in.

She looked impressed, but shouldn't have. "How'd you know?"

"People only ever want to discourage visitors from getting in. Not leaving."

The lawn still looked manicured enough that whatever had happened here must have transpired within the last few days. As they approached, the creamy tan walls loomed high and imposing. The windows were all tall and skinny, and he didn't spot a single one that didn't have the draperies pulled tight inside. The front double doors were paired into a single arch. He pounded a couple times — more wasted effort — and found them locked, as well.

They had better luck around back, where he found a garden shed unlocked. He grabbed a flat-edged shovel and used it to pry open the door at the garden exit.

It only took a couple steps in before he picked up the stink of decay and the voided human waste that followed in death's wake. It wasn't a kitchen smell, scraps gone rotten in the trash. This was pervasive. Cool weather, but damp... he was still guessing two or three days.

"This isn't going to be pretty," he said. "If you want to wait outside..."

She gave him a glare like he should've known better than to ask.

The kitchen was close by. He detoured in to rummage through the cabinets until he turned up a tin of Earl Gray tea. He ripped a paper towel in two and dumped a couple tablespoons of tea onto the halves, then twisted each one together into a makeshift sachet. One for her, one for himself.

"Hold that under your nose. The oil will help with the smell."

He took a boning knife, too, from the cutlery block. Just in case.

Here on the ground floor, you had to look to see much of anything of the ordinary, but it was there. A few holes in the walls scattered around, and when he probed one with the knife, he found the lead slug still in the plaster. A few hastily cleaned-up blood smears? Those, too.

Then he found the bodies in the walk-in cupboard off the dining room. Eight of them were arranged in a single row down the length of the room. Most had been shot, others stabbed, although they'd been laid out in here with obvious care. They hadn't been dumped in a hurry. The sort of thing survivors would do. While... what? Tending to something more important until they could get back to their dead?

Fiona looked in around his shoulder, then looked away. "Was it the same ones that did this who attacked us?"

"I don't think so."

"Then what — ?"

"Let's just keep looking before we jump to conclusions."

After there were no more surprises on the ground floor, they took the main stairs up to the second. Here it was mostly office space, and a small art gallery, its walls lined with paintings of a city of pillars — *the City of Pillars*, he assumed — and portraits of personages that appeared to be of both great power and great antiquity.

The cult of Banefre appeared to keep as orderly an existence as he remembered from his trip here years ago. They were people who had their routines locked down tight, and it started at the top. He recalled Banefre as being a bit of a discipline fanatic.

Up in the second-floor offices, someone had died at a computer station, a big brick-colored blotch of dried blood soaked into the fabric of the backrest. Everything was shut down, but now wasn't the time to start combing through files.

"Would you be okay to start pulling all the hard drives in here while I check upstairs?" She said she would, so he found a box in a closet to put them in, then passed her a pad of orange sticky-notes from another desk. "Label them."

The third floor was all bedrooms and bathrooms, as well appointed as a four-star hotel. Again, here was evidence that someone had died without ever seeing it coming, another bloodstain in the upper half of an unmade bed. He checked closets, under beds, skimmed through papers left on desks and escritoirs, and it was the usual stuff — people who knew this hidden side of the world and the things that walked its shadows, trying to fit the pieces together and make sense of it all.

At one end of the third floor's central hall, Declan found an enclosed servant's staircase leading upward. He'd known there was an attic from the outside, a couple of low peaks and eaves jutting from the squared-off roof. The stairs were narrow, and creaked, and led him up to an unfinished space with a lower ceiling — storage mostly, boxes and covered furniture under films of dust...

And a lingering smell like scorched meat.

He found it in an alcove in the northwest corner: a large urn made of dense ceramic, its lid tossed heedlessly aside so it could be turned into an impromptu flame-pot. At the bottom, something organic had burned until it had been reduced to brittle carbon. He couldn't tell what, only knew it would've been one of four options: stomach, lungs, liver, or entrails. Banefre's organs, removed from his body thousands of years ago.

If he poked around long enough, he knew he'd probably find three more just like this. Maybe one that had been locked away in the garden shed. Another one or two in the basement, along with what he *knew* he was going to find down there.

Jesus. Whoever hit this place, they'd really meant business.

He looked out the triangular window that let daylight into the alcove, and felt a twinge in his heart when he saw that it had a good overview of the canal that ran along the north edge of Regent's Park. Tree-lined and tranquil, the waterway was lined with colorful houseboats, and people out poling or paddling along in skiffs.

That was why this room — the view.

Most of the Arisen took few pleasures in life. They had purpose, and didn't have time for much else, because while their lives may have gone on, their vitality was always running out until they needed to sleep again. But Banefre, he remembered, had liked the canal, floating in a boat and letting the currents carry him awhile.

Declan had, at the time, wondered why. If it reminded him of a river in another place and era, specifics Banefre couldn't remember, only that a brief float upon the water called to him, meant something to him from ages past when he'd been a mortal man. Even then, it wouldn't have been from a life of privilege. His kind had always been bound to servitude.

But someone had taken him on the water once, and for a while, he may have even felt free.

Declan set the lid back on the urn. It deserved that much respect, at least.

By the time he got back down to the second floor, Fiona had finished pulling the drives from their computers. She'd wrapped them in printer paper with rubber bands to protect their contacts and had them in the box, waiting on a desk and ready to go.

"You found something," she said when she saw him. "You have that look."

"There's a canopic jar in the attic. Do you know what those are for?"

"For organs, right? From a body that's being embalmed?"

"That's it." He pointed at the box of hard drives. "For the Deathless, they're like back-up storage. Four of them. Even if their body gets destroyed, they can come back through one of those, grow around it. That connection to this world is still there. Unless the contents of the jars are destroyed, too. Like this was."

Fiona got a queasy look. "Then, what? They're screwed? Dead for real?"

"Probably." *But not necessarily.* He didn't want to get ahead of himself though. *Keep an open mind, see where the evidence led.* "We should get down to the basement. Sorry, I've been saving the worst for last. I'm afraid that's where the real horror show is going to be."



For M'kaal, for the people of the Ta'alun, for the world they stood astride, the cycles of the moon passed. The seasons flowed one into the next as days grew short, then long again, and the belly of the Great Mother River swelled once more, to bring them life and favor.

While the boat builders gathered reeds in vaster quantities than they ever had, to build on greater scales than they'd ever needed, M'kaal took to the river in the boats they had already. It was humbling, a warrior-shaman who now needed to be taught by fishermen. He learned to paddle, learned to steer. He learned how to straighten his course when the river had other ideas, and how to watch ahead for hidden sandbars so he didn't run aground. He learned

to follow the river's bends, and how to settle into the calm, swift channels so he could surrender his efforts and let the water do the work.

His new teachers sat back to watch and correct and advise, chewing on sedge grass and laughing whenever they had a chance to prove themselves his better. He only fell in twice, and when D'jaal found it as funny the second time as he had the first, M'kaal threw his brother in so he could see the humor of it for himself.

But day by day, they learned the ways of water, M'kaal and D'jaal and over twenty more. Because this wasn't going to be like setting off across land, a single man at the head of a company of riders. Every boat would need its own leader, who knew his vessel well enough to wield as sure a hand over it as he ever had with his horse.

And on that dreamed-of day when he saw the hand of Fate at work as he rarely had before, he was on the river as he was most days. They all were, learning to navigate in tight groups while staying out of each other's way, when someone stood and pointed into the far distance upstream. One by one, they all did, until each man had stopped and anchored himself in place and could only stare at what was coming.

A speck at first, it took on form as the current brought it closer. A man, waving. Another, shouting and laughing in jubilation. A vessel, crude but afloat, seemingly the hollowed-out trunk of a tree.

It was three of their own, and, with bonds around his wrists and knees, a man the likes of which M'kaal had never encountered.

For the first time in the history of the world, scouts had returned from the south.



CHAPTER SIX

The Arisen often went about their tasks alone, or in the company of the cult that served them. But there were also occasions when they might choose to work together for some common goal, as had happened a few years earlier, when Banefre had sought the help of Kemsiyet to recover a bronze chalice from the British Museum.

They all had strengths that could complement others' shortcomings. Valuable affinities that one lacked might be innate abilities to another. Spells that one had no knowledge of how to perform might be utterances that another had practiced for thousands of years, and could be taught or used on an ally's behalf. A favor done during one Descent might have mortal lifetimes before it could be repaid.

Banefre had learned the chalice was at the museum after being unearthed during a dig near Bani Mazar, but not precisely where it was kept. Taking it back could have been easier had it been put on display, but the chalice had been one of those curiosities that curators never liked — no one knew quite what to make of it. It matched no known designs. It was found in a deeper stratum than it should've been. It was a form of bronze they'd never seen, known to few beyond the Arisen — pyropus, alloyed with gold and alchemized with blood. With an artifact so anomalous, sometimes the best recourse was to set it aside and pretend it didn't exist, and hope that one day something else might come along that would put it in a context that made more sense.

So Banefre knew what, and he knew where, just not pinpointed enough. But Kemsiyet might. She had her ways. Get her close enough, in the general vicinity, get her familiar with the area, and her sight might eventually extend beyond her eyes. It looked like a trance, and on one level it was, but it also let her see things that unaided eyes could not, not just in the moment but across time, as well. It required days of visits, combined with maps of the staff-only areas that Banefre's cult had acquired. It took relying on Kemsiyet's own charmed existence to circumvent any inconvenience at being caught where she should not have been. But she eventually uncovered the chalice's location, in a box in a cabinet containing similar inconvenient oddities.

Among the most relied upon of Banefre's people was a brawny fellow named Garrett Hunley, who'd driven them to the museum every day, and accompanied them inside, and seemed a natural-born salesman when it came to coaxing preferential treatment and private tours for his employer.

And the last time Declan had seen Hunley, he'd buried a machete in the man's skull inside the limestone manor house north of Waterford. Because he was no longer a man, but a slave remade in cruelty and bloodlust.

Whatever circumstances had done that to him had more than likely happened here, in the basement of this house on Regent's Park.

Basement, however, was not a word that did it justice. Beyond the door at the foot of the subterranean stairs, it became a grotto made largely of sandstone, part tomb and part temple and ritual chamber. The lights were still on, but only barely. He found a dimmer switch to brighten the bulbs hidden in the ceiling.

The stink of death was strong again down here, and underneath it, a reek of ash from something that had burned hot and furious. Here, their makeshift tea bags were essential again.

Unlike upstairs, the bodies hadn't been moved or cared for — three of them, a man and two women, scattered around the stones and carvings of the temple. They all appeared to lie where they'd died, and they hadn't died easy. He knelt to inspect each one, front and back, and couldn't find a single wound that looked neat enough, clean enough, to have come from a gun or a knife. They were bigger than that, coarse and ragged and messy.

These poor people had been *mauled* to death. All in all, the kind of thing that Fasad would do. Or a Shuankhsen, itself.

He was betting that the camcorder in the floor would be able to tell a good deal more about what had happened. Whatever they'd been doing here — and he was starting to suspect what — they'd been recording it. A single camera, high-end by the looks of it, was mounted on a tripod that had been knocked over. When he righted it, a cable came with it. They'd been shooting tethered, the other end of the long USB cable connected to a notebook PC sitting on a chair several feet away. Another chair faced it — an on-the-fly workstation. The lid was still open but the display was dark. He tried the power button and got nothing.

Working hypothesis: The laptop had sat here soft-lighting a roomful of corpses until the battery went as dead as everyone else.

He shut its lid and unplugged the cable and handed it over to Fiona. "Another one we need to pack to go."

Onward. He was hoping this grisly search was about over. The tomb was down a corridor that right-angled in the middle before it led into the chamber. The farther along you got, the more prevalent the smoke damage became. The chamber was as blackened as the inside of a whiskey barrel, but nothing more so than the scorched

sarcophagus sitting on a dais in the middle. A shrunken figure hung half-in and half-out of it, charred beyond recognition, an agonized sculpture made of charcoal.

Banefre, naturally. Six thousand and more years of history he'd passed through, and they'd left him like this. Whether the attackers had used a flamethrower or some sort of incendiary device, they'd hit him hard and fast and burned him up in a hurry.

Clearly, they knew the consequences of giving him time to react.

Look around, and he was sure he'd turn up another canopic jar or two in the same condition as the one in the attic.

“Are you about ready to entertain any ideas about what's going on? Or are you just going to keep collecting evidence and avoiding a rush to fecking judgment until we drop of exhaustion?”

Behind him, Fiona was trying to sound annoyed, except she was pressing the tea under her nose so hard, she sounded only nasal. He nearly laughed, God help him, but he needed to. He nodded, and walked her out of the sarcophagus chamber and back to the outer temple.

So what did they have here, definitively? Two sets of corpses that had met their demises and been treated in very different ways... and, he was willing to bet, killed several hours apart. Forensics tests might show a distinction in times of death, but that was a resource they'd have to do without.

“Assailants unknown,” he said, and pointed to the laptop. “Maybe that can tell us more. But whoever they were, they came prepared and they were vicious and they got the job done fast. They came in and split into two teams, one upstairs and one down here. They killed everybody they found. But there were survivors. Maybe they weren't here, or maybe they hid well enough to escape detection for a time. They weren't the primary targets anyway. These assailants could've tried to clean the place out totally if they'd burned it down, but they took care not to do that, because that attracts attention. They've already done the main thing they came for, right? Banefre. They've burned his body, burned his organs. He's not coming back, they've made sure of that. Only... I think the survivors refused to take that as the last word on the subject.”

He pointed at the scattered signs of a ritual that seemed to have been interrupted or abandoned in progress. It appeared centered around a narrow sandstone platform, like a short, low wall. Around it was a quartet of braziers whose coals had guttered to ash. On the floor sat four large pyropus bowls. Three of them were filled with stinking, congealed blood; the fourth had started that way, but had been overturned. An old leather-bound book and an obsidian blade and various other artifacts lay randomly about the floor.

“I think what they tried to do was raise him back up again and it went wrong.”

“How? If his body's destroyed...”

“They got a new one. It's possible. One of his own people may have volunteered to be the guinea pig. They wanted their avenger back and they wanted him in a hurry.

It may have been a contingency plan he had in place already. They just cocked it up. It's got to go just right, or there's hell to pay. They tried to resurrect Banefre and made themselves a Shuankhsen."

And hadn't it all gone to shite then. See the blood, see the casualties. He'd made a few Fasad out of the survivors he'd thought would prove most useful and killed the rest.

"So Banefre knew, didn't he," Fiona said. "About the Depiction. He knew what she was guarding back home."

"That would've been between them. But he obviously did."

Declan knelt beside the body that lay nearest the camera and the chair where the laptop had been set up. A young woman in her twenties in a checked blouse and jeans, pale reddish hair pulled back in a short ponytail. One side of her throat looked like she'd been hit by a leopard's paw. He thought he remembered her from his stay here, a quiet sort who did her work and kept to the background most of the time.

Proximity? No one else was even close to the workstation.

"What do you think?" he asked Fiona. "Does she look like a tech geek to you?"

Fiona shrugged. "I guess. What's a tech geek supposed to look like, anyway?"

He dangled the keys to the rental, then tossed them over. Good catch.

"Do us a favor, would you? Could you go out and buy as much baking soda as you can carry? Me, I'm going to be busy here looking around for plastic wrap."

It took her a moment to make the connection, then, "Ah, Jesus God, you can't be serious."

"Afraid so. One of them needs to come with us and I think she's the best bet."

Fiona was shaking her head, *no no no*. "The plane. How do you expect to get her on the plane?"

"I don't. We'll be driving home."



CHAPTER SEVEN

The world was diseased, suppurating like a wound, and the worst pus it oozed was called human.

Their green fields were bad enough, because here grew things that they had planted, and grazed beasts they'd raised to be too stupid to live on their own if turned loose. Their villages and towns were worse, great mewling clots of humanity bunched together in herds nearly as stupid as their animals. They stank of mindless obsolescence, good only for shackles and the lash, until whatever pitiful use they might've had was wrung from them so they could be disposed of.

Undoubtedly this city of hills and stone, this Waterford, would prove worst of all, its streets a network of open sewers running with the filth of women, children, and men whose very existence was a crime against the cosmic order.

But in his jacket pocket was the face of their judgment.

The face of Arem-Abfu would be their deliverance to the oblivion that should have been their fate from the beginning.



After he'd retreated from the tomb of Kemsiyet — a prison that had dared to confine what should never have been confined — he waded deep through earth and roots and loam. He shared the thoughts of worms. He surfaced some distance away, in the middle of a cluster of trees, rising from the unbroken ground as though coughed up by a secret grave. He unpacked his prize from the sprung hinge of his jaw, and in the deepening darkness turned away from the stink of humanity.

The Fasad he'd brought with him were all dead, dismantled, disintegrated, and in ruins. But he would make more when he needed them. The raw material was everywhere for the taking; the land teemed with it.

For the present, he'd broken himself in his efforts, and needed time to heal. This body he wore was not like the others. It was new and unrefined. It had never known

preservation, the treatment of salts and herbs and oils. It had never been subjected to wrappings and incantations, had never withered during the repose of endless sleep. Organs sloshed inside it, thick and heavy. He would've taken them out himself if he could, but was not so confident in how well the rest would function without them. Certainly, it would make it more difficult to blend with their herds. Sekhem, the life force that moved through everything, may have been attracted to the body, but not with such strength it would recast the shell.

He would have to be content for it to knit its broken jaw.

As he sought shelter in an old barn sweet with the reek of mildewed hay, he remembered that, no, he would never move in that kind of lightened, fragrant body ever again. These were memories of... something else. *Someone* else. Another life of endless lifetimes, gone to him now, and good riddance. The connection to him was as repugnant as this suit of fresh meat... but if the suit could be wielded as a weapon against Deathless and human life alike, then he would wear it with gratitude for the harm it could do.

There were layers in here, in this body, this mind. Layers of memory, layers of ability, like striations of sediment laid down across gulfs of time, and now disturbed, stirred up into a muddy cloud.

Names, too, roiled in the murk. *Banefre*... that was one. *Ewan*... that was another. But they no longer existed as anything but history. They were the scaffolding on which he was built. They were bone and bronze. Over time, he would sort the stores of knowledge they'd left behind, and continue plundering it all until he'd made it his own, and every memory of them was gone. He would eat their residue and remains just as the goddess of oblivion, Ammut, the Devourer, ate her offerings of souls.

He knew it was now his lot to serve her, to revere her even as he reviled her, and that this was something new. Her realm was his now. Her mark was upon him.

They had a name for him — Shuankhsen — but this was only a label. It applied to any of them who were Lifeless, rather than the Deathless, and he wanted better than a label. He may have let go of the old names, but still had a need for one, for a name worthy of being uttered in fear.

A recollection bubbled up from the sludge of memory, a fear that this suit of meat had absorbed when it was smaller, younger, weaker. A fear so great it had once crippled the body, its owner preferring to huddle in a wet bed rather than leave its safety for the toilet. A fear rooted in a rhyme its parents had taught it:

*Rawhead and Bloody Bones
steals naughty children from their homes,
takes them to his dirty den
and they are never seen again.*

If Rawhead was a name meant to instill fear, then that was the name he wanted. Let him be Rawhead. Let him live up to its promise.



Here on the streets of Waterford, they parted before him like he was the blade of a plow and they were the waiting earth.

His jaw had quickly healed, and to look at him, nothing was outwardly wrong. Most people would have found him pleasing to look at. He'd gauged his features in windows and mirrors; they seemed to compare as well as anyone's, maybe better than many. People liked a strong jaw, and that he had. They liked high cheekbones, and he had those, too. Blue eyes, yes. The nose was a bit crooked, broken once and healed a few millimeters off, but that only added interest and mystery. The hairline was perhaps too far back, but he saw worse, and there seemed no shame in it.

Rawhead hid nothing. He had no wish to go unnoticed. He *dared* them to look.

Dogs were the quickest to react, stinking and slavering creatures that they were, erupting at his presence from a distance, then turning into slinking cowards if he glared their way.

Their dull-witted masters were soon to follow. With some, his presence along the pathways took them by surprise, and once they saw him, got a sense of him, they held their breath and eased to one side, eyes downcast, as though they hoped to pass unseen. Others saw him coming from farther away and crossed the street to avoid him. Those inside cars locked their doors, thinking it could make a difference.

Now and again, he would stop to stare through the window of a shop and watch the people on the other side of the glass drift deeper inside to safety. When he tried it outside a restaurant or café, they would lose their appetites as well as their nerve. He watched them look around for another table they might move to, but by the time they could consult their server, he would be gone, leaving behind an empty window that now seemed somehow stained.

He was the Rawhead of their oldest nightmares, and they surely felt it.

Still, it was only a game. No one bled, no one screamed, no one died. After a few hours he tired of it. The sun went down and the sky turned black and the streetlights tried to beat the darkness back. Now he had real work to do. It was time to see how these malignancies of life would react to what he *really* had to show them.

He found it on a street less traveled by night than earlier in the day: a pub that drew its middling crowd early, and once there, they seemed to never leave. They numbered two dozen or so, tucked into dark booths across darker tables, or lined along the bar with their buttocks hanging off their stools.

They appeared neither joyous nor despondent — they were simply *here*, another stop in their drab and pointless lives. He smelled their mingled breath, reeking of ale

and stout and whiskey and the cigarettes whose smoke wafted about their heads in a gray haze. He numbed his ears to the murmur of their conversations and their boasts.

Rawhead slipped in quickly, giving them little time to notice.

Along one wall sat an old upright piano, its keys yellowed and dingy, its cabinet tall and as solemn as a coffin. The legs at either end of its keyboard looked like ornate pillars in miniature. How perfect.

He would bring them down.

The piano's top board was nearly the height of his head. Eye level — just right. It held a few songbooks, an ashtray, a glass with a forgotten inch of warm ale. He shoved it all aside to make room. From his jacket pocket he removed the weight that hung so heavily there — the Blasphemous Depiction, the mangled face of the faceless, the visage of he who could never be portrayed.

Because he was sensitive to such things without being susceptible, it seemed to pulse in his hand. The energies that infused it swirled in a loop, drawing in and putting out, one feeding the other, hungry for more to work with.

He perched it near one corner of the top of the piano, then pulled out the bench, its legs making a loud scrape across the wooden floor. He sat at one end, as if he only half-cared about playing.

Arem-Abfu... show them what they dare not see. Show them what their minds can never hold. I lead them to you.

He picked a key at random near the end of the piano's range and pecked it with a finger as rigid as a raven's beak. A deep bass tone juddered from the soundboard, the strings a few increments out of tune with each other, an abrading note at war with itself.

As it faded, he spiked the note again. Then again. And again.

One by one, they turned their attention to him while he maintained the slow and steady rhythm. Puzzled or curious, annoyed or amused, they glanced up from their tables and swiveled around at the bar.

They had ears to hear. Now let them have eyes to see.

One by one they found it, their gazes pulled toward the sculpture as if by the gravity of a black hole. As they looked upon the effigy, the effigy also gazed into them.

They came to it, mesmerized by the ominous cadence. They stayed, ensnared by the exploding density of their vision. And they would leave, if they managed to leave at all, forever changed, forever frayed, forever ruined.

From one of the booths came a quavering moan of distress. At the bar, someone hurled his last few hours of intake splattering onto the floor. Another ran shrieking into the street. Someone else burst out with a long, shouting laugh that began in euphoria and ended with a sound of choking.

A straggling few hadn't yet seen it, and reacted with alarm only to the madness growing around them. They caught on soon enough, and joined the rest as its source.

The cosmos was deep and devouring. It gave and took, and each and every one of them became privy to it all. They saw the photons that bombarded them, the particles of radon that they breathed. They were deafened by the roar of blood in their veins. They drowned in the taste of their own tongues. A thousand thousand memories all clamored for attention at once, and they relived their lives in an instant.

Some earlier, foundational part of him had heard people speak of laughter wrung from madness. *Now* he knew the sound of it. Now he knew the sound that eyes made when someone gouged them from her head. Now he knew the sound of shattering bones when a man could no longer abide the smell of his friend's marrow.

He knew the sound of minds breaking and the symphony when their bodies followed. In all the languages of men he understood, there was still no word to do justice to its glory.

Rawhead returned the effigy to his pocket and slipped out the door to leave them to it, putting the tumult behind him as he strolled down the street.

And yet, for all this, the effigy had only whispered. Soon he would make it roar.



They came from every direction, came from near and far. They ascended the wide steps of the tallest tower ever made and converged in the council's hallowed chambers: shamans for war, shamans for crops, shamans for healing and for weather and for divining the will of the gods. And first among them, Karnuth, the Father of them all and of the people that they ruled.

They met by the light of oil lamps fixed into the walls, settled onto benches softened with the furs of animals, and listened to the testimony of the three scouts who had returned to challenge all they thought they knew about Fate.

The south, they learned, was only the province of men and women, not monsters. Although if their tales were to be believed, it was populated with strange creatures they had never seen here, including hulking gray beasts that lurked in the river, their jaws big enough to rip apart even a *subok*, the fearsome lizard whose teeth were used for war clubs.

Still, it wasn't a world of monsters, but people. They may not have looked the same. Their skin was darker, and their hair was like wool, but there was no doubt they were just men and women, more like the people of the north than not. They raised their children in huts, and the more ambitious of them built in wood and stone. They took what the earth gave them and asked for no more. They were plentiful, tribes beyond reckoning, as many people as might serve the needs of the Ta'alun for generations. Maybe even for the duration of time.

“They are fierce, though,” the scouts warned. “They won’t be easy to conquer. They fight among themselves now, but if they were ever to put aside their differences and unite, they would be indomitable.”

The council murmured and grumbled. Judgments like that were never easy to hear. And from scouts. Just scouts, not men of learning and wisdom, who explored the powers and patterns of all things unseen.

“What about their gods?” one of the council demanded to know. “Did their gods impress you?”

“Idols and carvings, that’s all they were,” came the answer. “We never saw them move. We never heard them speak.”

Laughter. Those were the sorts of things that were easy to hear.

“Then how else can we welcome such news,” another of the council said, “but as a sign that as long as they are there for the taking, we should send enough of our ablest warriors south, to take as many as we need.”

They liked that, too.

“With all you’ve seen of them,” another, named Na’ardook, demanded of the scouts, “compared to what we’ve built and what we have and what we’ve learned, can you deny that we alone are favored above all people?”

No, they said. They couldn’t deny it. And even if they had, M’kaal thought, the men of the council would never have believed it, and would only have shouted the wrong answer down.

“Then if we are favored above all the world’s people,” Na’ardook went on, “what greater evidence could we ask for to prove what we’ve always known already? That *we* are the chosen of the gods, and they will exalt us in whatever we choose to do. The south has already fallen to us. We only need to go there and claim it.”

Cheers now. Throughout it all, Karnuth was content to hold back and watch and listen. Here, his job was not to proclaim, but to make sure every man had his say, if he wanted it.

As M’kaal wanted it now. He’d heard enough. Hear much more, and he would soon be sickened.

“Chosen of the gods? Favored above all the world’s people? You *know* this, do you?” he stood and said to Na’ardook, once it was clear he’d finished his turn speaking. “Tell me. How much of the world have you seen? Have you ever been north of the dam? Have you even been that far?”

A heavy silence descended in the chamber. M’kaal knew the look of a man who suddenly wanted to kill him. As he knew the look of a coward who would never try.

“You speak of the gods as if they’re slaves bound to come when you call them, and carry out your orders under a penalty of death if they don’t.” M’kaal left his place at his bench and wandered among them. “The gods choose no one. Or if they do, it does not last. I’ve stood and fought beside men who woke up one morning boasting that *they* were chosen of the gods, and before the sun was fully risen they were on the ground choking on their own blood. I’ve seen such men killed by boys they never bothered to notice, because how could a mere boy be a threat. This is what happens to those whose greatest pride is that they’re a favorite of the gods. I speak no ill of the gods, but as powerful as they are, the gods are still only instruments of Fate.”

He had them now, every pair of eyes, and if he spoke well and true, before he was done he might have won nearly every heart.

“You give us too little credit,” he told Na’ardook, embarrassed now, then pointed at others in turn. “And you. And you. All we’ve done, everything we’ve conceived and built, we have done on our own. What we have done is prove ourselves most worthy of favor if the gods decide to notice and bestow it. The only evidence I’ve ever seen, most of it written in blood, is that *this* is what the gods respond to. So if they choose us at all, they don’t choose us for who we are, but for what we do.”

He stalked the light and the shadows thrown by the dancing flames of the lamps.

“That means if we enjoy their favor one day, we could lose it the next. If we are lax. If we are complacent. If we are stupid. If we are ever bested by those we think we should defeat. If we make the mistake of believing we can sit back and puff ourselves up with comforting lies that the favor of the gods will follow us wherever we go, in whatever we do... no matter how foolish.” Now, at last, he ended up facing Na’ardook, who still smoldered in humiliation. “If you wish to send a war band south, knowing what little you know, then why don’t you be the one to lead them. You *and* your sons.”

With a roar of outrage Na’ardook erupted from his bench, and M’kaal was waiting, stomping a kick into his belly that drove the air from his lungs and sent him tumbling backward over his bench again. M’kaal strode forward, towered over him, satisfied Na’ardook wouldn’t be getting up again until he stopped gasping for air. By the sound of it, that would be a while.

“No one here has done more with a spear or a war club than I have to carry our ambitions beyond our borders and carve them on the face of the world. But I would gladly set my weapons down, or wield them only with my right hand, if with my left I could wield our magic for the sake of conquest.”

They all shifted uneasily now and began murmuring among themselves. Even Karnuth wore a look of concern, as if what came out of this night could put them on a strange and untested new path through the world.

“We all know the power of a thing’s True Name. It is how our magic works. All things in nature have a True Name. The wind. The sky. The clouds. Each kind of fish in the river. Storms. To call a thing by its True Name is to wield power over it greater than any spear or club.”

He turned then to look at Karnuth, their gazes locked as everything that passed between them passed unspoken. *You know what it is I’m about to say, but it is only by your leave that I will say it. The find was yours and, ever since, you have feared what the rest might do with it. But the time has come for them to know.* The moment was long, and even the moon above them held its breath, because moments like these were the fulcrums on which worlds rose and fell. At last Karnuth shut his eyes and gave him a single nod.

“No one here has accomplished more with a spear or a club than I have,” M’kaal told them again. “But these are crude tools. I will be the first to admit it. Why should we leave our greatest ambitions to be won with our crudest tools?”

The council began to rally again, intrigued.

“As I have done my part with them, no one here has done more than Karnuth to fathom the mysteries of our souls. Our human souls. All the time he has spent hovering between the realms of life and death has given him the greatest discovery any of us ever could have made. That the soul of each man, each woman, each child, has its own True Name. Learn it, and we would gain power over it, too.”

The chamber fell so quiet he could hear the hissing of the wicks in the oil lamps. Then, one by one, the rest of the council began to see the possibilities...

Each man, each woman, was steered by the dictates of their soul, just as a paddle tilted in the water at the back of a boat directed the course of its prow. This, they knew.

But... learn to steer the soul, and you would steer the person. Steer a person, and you could steer a tribe. Steer a tribe, and you could steer an army. Steer enough armies, and you would control the world.

And their eyes began to light with hunger for what could be.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Fiona found something more nauseating about this than all the rest. Before, she'd only been a spectator, nearly a victim and definitely a survivor. Now, though, she felt complicit. A body wrapped in layers of garbage bags cinched tight with tape? A body put in the boot of a car and doused with baking soda to absorb any smell that might leak out? That was the sort of business guilty people got up to.

They were ready to go by early evening. From inside the house, they'd been able to open a gate in the wraparound brick wall, and that let them pull the Audi into a short driveway beside the house. Nightfall, lights out, using the trees to screen them, the body out and in the boot in less than thirty seconds — nobody could've seen a thing. It was like Declan had done this before. She didn't want to know.

They left as soon as they were loaded, and Fiona had to check the box with the hard drives and laptop three times before she'd assured herself she hadn't forgot anything.

"You're doing fine," Declan told her after the third time. "You're a rock."

Which she rather liked the sound of, until she didn't. "Rocks sink. I don't want to be a rock."

"Fine. Tell me when you know what you want to be, and I'll use that, instead."

She squinted at the evening city traffic, every glaring headlight boring into the center of her brain. "What happens to everybody back there? We can't just leave them like that, to... ."

Rot, she thought, but right now, had trouble saying.

"No. We can't. I'll get on it after we're back. Those discreet people I mentioned before we left? They get around. It's more than that, though. The place will need to be sanitized, if you get my drift."

"The weird stuff carted away, you mean."

He nodded. "Better that that's not found by just anyone."

Archival records, too, she figured. If they'd left a hard drive behind, she didn't know about it, but there was a lot of paper, as well.

"What happens if we die, yourself and me? 'Burn what needs burning and bury who needs burying,' that's how you put it last night. Do we just vanish, then? Do we leave the people who loved us wondering what happened and where we went to, and never getting an answer? While these... these demigods go on, playing their games?"

Declan sat with that one for too long for her to have any faith there could be a rebuttal that counted for anything.

"We're not going to die," he finally said.

Well... except for that.



They rolled west out of London on the M4. After they swung around Reading, they cut across the North Wessex Downs, and not long after that, skirted the southern tip of the Cotswolds on the way to the border. A perfectly lovely drive by day, no doubt, but by night it was nothing but darkness and motion and the shrieking whine of tires on pavement. And the fact that carrying the body made it feel as if she were being chased by a dead woman. Then they crossed the Mouth of the Severn, and so much for England — now it was Wales, the rest of the way to the sea.

From start to finish was a five-hour haul, and Declan was pleased enough with the time they were making that he pulled off in a lay-by after Swansea. After a bit of fitful shut-eye they were on their way again, in ample time to catch the 2:45 ferry out of Fishguard. They bought their tickets and rolled across the ramp onto the car deck, then joined the exodus up top with the other bleary-eyed travelers making the pre-dawn crossing.

It was like a small ocean liner, four hours across the Irish Sea to Rosslare Harbour, in the southeast corner of the island. Nothing they could do now to push the pace. The lull would do them good.

"We could upgrade to a cabin," Declan suggested. "Two berths, no waiting. We'll be there before you know it."

Which sounded good at first, then Fiona decided against it, not what she needed after all. As chilly as it was out there, she wanted to be on the promenade deck. Blankets and deck chairs and coffee and the open air and moonlight on the water far below — they sounded like a tonic, the best way of cleansing these last thirty-eight hours from her skin, from her soul.

Declan really wanted the cabin, she could tell. He let her have this anyway.

"Until I find out different, I'm going to assume this was how Banefre got across," he said, once they were settled in under their blankets beneath the stars. "Him and

the rest. His Fasad. Have to keep them out of sight, no hiding the way *they* look, but a van, maybe. They'd be fine, being treated like cargo."

"Wouldn't that have been a little advanced for him?"

"Not really. Ancient soul, gone wrong and twisted up in that new body... it's all jumbled together now. Whoever volunteered to be the new flesh, there'd be some of the mind left, too. So he's got fresh resources to tap. And picture IDs, readymade. All in all, he's well equipped to make his way through the modern world on his own."

He must have been reading her dip in mood when he reached across, chair to chair, and gave her forearm a knock.

"I know. Not what you thought you were signing on for, is it?"

She shook her head no, shut her eyes against the cold sea breeze that threatened to make them water. "I thought it was just going to be quiet days in the countryside with time to get in some firsthand learning about what really goes on under the surface of the world. Drawing a good salary to do it."

"Sometimes it's better not to pull back that curtain, and just leave it where it is. Most people are better off not looking."

"Oh, so now he tells me."

Declan tipped his coffee and leaned back to stargaze. "How'd you get brought in? I know they recruit, keep an eye out, got their feelers here and there for the likely ones. But there had to be something you did."

"It goes back to university. For most of it, I was Little Miss Practical. Up and down my class schedules, nothing but business and economics and computer studies. Someone like you, it'd probably put you to sleep just to look at the course names."

"Ignorant thug that I am."

"I'm so glad you're accepting that with dignity," she said. "Third year, though, I took a philosophy of religion course. Just for myself. Because I was interested. Grow up Catholic, you either go along with it your whole life, or run away from it soon as you can... or, if you're me, start wondering if some of those stories aren't actually covering over older stories, earlier truths. For my final paper I wrote about the theory of Jesus spending some of his formative years in Egypt. How that could've influenced his ideas on resurrection, and how Egyptian magic might've accounted for some of the miracles. I really went out there, don't you know. Really dove in."

Declan grinned across at her, the first smile she'd seen out of him this entire ordeal. "I can guess how that went over."

"I can still quote one of the remarks my professor left on it: *Ideas so tenuous they stretch supposition to the breaking point.* In that spiky handwriting, like, ooo, he couldn't write it angry enough. But it must've got me noticed."

Fate, maybe. They were big on that in these cults.

"How about yourself? I can't imagine there's an obvious career track from the British Armed Forces to gunslinging for mummies."

“Obvious, no. But it’s there,” he said, and puffed out a sigh. “My last years in, I was assigned to the Special Reconnaissance Regiment. Got in early, volunteered as soon as it was formed. A couple years on, I was part of the deployment to Northern Ireland. You’ve still got IRA hardliners up there that never agreed to the ’97 cease-fire, or the Good Friday Agreement the year after, and never will. As far as they’re concerned, the Troubles are still going on. They give themselves names like the Real IRA, the Continuity IRA. Still a problem. Officially, we were there only for gathering intelligence, and in an advisory capacity to the Police Service. No uniforms, no weapons, just blend in and watch. Surveillance and reports. Officially, it was strictly non-operational.”

“If you have to say *officially* twice, there’s a whole lot you’re *not* saying.”

He looked distant then. “When you have people who still consider themselves at war, sometimes you have to deal with them like you are, too.”

On the sea, there was a lot of room for a thousand-yard stare.

“Late one night I was set up watching a site that was going to be raided if the right blokes should turn up. A garage, motor repair, that sort of place. I was across the street and up a floor, had eyes on the place — magnification, infrared. It didn’t go the way we thought... but something was there. I saw something that by all appearances either couldn’t have been human or couldn’t have been alive. And it didn’t show up on infrared. Whatever it was, it latched onto this kid’s head... and he just went boneless. After he went down, I didn’t have a good visual then. I radioed it out and our team went in — it was a joint thing with the PSNI — but even as quick as they got there, this kid was still dead on the floor, alone. They said his heart was gone, and it didn’t come out neatly.”

She felt herself recoil inside. “Was it one of *them*? A Fasad, or... ?”

“Maybe. A Shuankhsen will do that, some of them. But maybe not. There are other things out there, too, that... .”

He shook his head, not wanting to get into it, and she didn’t think she wanted to hear it. Weren’t the chill and salt air supposed to be cleansing? Not when you kept piling on more gunk.

“When you go to file a report on a thing like that,” Declan went on, “that’s when you find out what your superiors are prepared to hear and what they don’t want to have any part of. They’ll tell you to think it over carefully. ‘Is this *really* the report you want to file? Are you sure it didn’t happen this way, instead?’ You don’t want to get a reputation as a flake. You don’t want to be the lad who starts seeing monsters when he stays up past his bedtime.”

“But you saw what you saw. They found what they found.”

“Ask any airline pilot who sees a UFO. They’ll tell you how it goes.” Declan shrugged it off, water under the bridge. “I left it out. I wrote the report they wanted. I didn’t feel good about it, and made sure they knew. Like you said, it got me noticed. An old officer with the SRR, he was plugged into all this. He did some due diligence,

found out my marriage wasn't in a good place at the time and getting worse. He thought I'd be a good fit with Kemsiyet. What she was guarding, and why. He called me a natural born sheepdog."

Fiona gave him a quick once-over. He needed a shave, and his unruly haircut may have been a half-inch or so past regulation, but still: "You're not as scruffy as all that."

"It's not the look, it's the role," he said. "The world is mostly sheep. That's not a knock on them, it's who most people are. They just want to graze and get through the day in one piece and make little sheep."

He means me, she thought. He's just too diplomatic to say it.

"Then, out past the shadows are the wolves. They like the taste of sheep. And most sheep are easy pickings, because they never know the wolves are there until it's too late. So what you need running interference in between are the sheepdogs."

She found it a lovely analogy, until the obvious hit her, and she started laughing.

"So you're not an English thug at all," she said. "You're an English Sheepdog."

He narrowed one eye at her in mock warning. "Who still bites. Don't forget."

The farther they got from shore, the less light bled in from land, and the more the stars seemed to gather and thicken. A deep night sky like this had always given her a feeling of either connection and eternity, or insignificance and melancholy. She couldn't always predict which.

"What's Kemsiyet like?" she asked. "She'd awakened and was gone before I ever got to the house. A thing that comes around once every 1461 years on its own and I miss it by a couple of weeks. Ever since, I've been wondering... what is she like?"

"You mean besides the very idea of her being terrifying?"

"Beneath all that, yeah. I know they've got this obsession with purpose and that overrides everything. But underneath that, there's got to be some kind of core."

Declan ran his finger around the plastic lid of his cup. "Funny you should put it that way. When she was made, mind you, the decree she pronounced before her Judge, her decree of the five-fold soul, was *ka*... the essence. So, no matter what she does or doesn't remember that's a guiding beacon to her, how everything has its fundamental essence, and if you took it away, it wouldn't be that thing anymore. She'll look for it in you. So when you meet her, don't try to be someone you're not, to try to impress her or because you think it would go over better. She'll see through it."

Well, that wasn't good news, was it? She'd been doing that most of her life.

"The Judge she's pledged to is the First Judge... Usekh-Nemtet. The judge of judges. He's supposed to be the most humane and wise of the lot. It's said that when you stand before him, he's got no set appearance. He looks like your father."

Probably meant to comfort. But then, what if you didn't get on with your da?

“And that’s fitting, too,” Declan continued. “Remember how I told you that, since way back, they’ve been putting together a composite of her history, from the memories that pop up during her different Descents? They think she might have been a mother, during her original lifetime. She’s remembered children before. Caring for them. She was either a mother herself, or tasked with caring for someone else’s children. So that’s in her, too. It seems to be one of the things that define her, that never got entirely buried by the rest. There’s something of the mother about her. Remember that, and you’ll be fine.”

Just never disobey her, Fiona thought, then couldn’t help but dwell on that poor woman crossing the sea in the boot of their car, and what was probably waiting for her.

Because, like all mothers, Kemsiyet would have her ways of cutting through the shite to get down to the truth of things.



Knowledge. They had knowledge. Every human soul possessed a True Name.

They had understanding. To call a thing of nature by its True Name was to gain a measure of control over it.

And theories. They had theories. To call a human soul by its True Name should lead to binding it with your will, and gaining control over the man or woman inside whom that Name was written.

What they did not yet have was proof. A man, after all, was not a fish. A woman was not the western wind. A village, no matter how lowly and unlearned its people, was not a field of grain. They all had wills of their own.

What the shamans of the Ta’alun needed was a test, to prove beyond any doubt that, indeed, this was one more truth behind the world that Fate had led them to. One more achievement to win them greater favor among whatever gods might choose to take notice. Did Fate not already seem to want them to try?

Fate, they realized, had delivered to them the means for the surest test they could ever have devised: the captive their scouts had brought home, this man from the south. No slave they could pull away from making bricks or dragging sledges and stacking stones would be any less like them than this man was. So let them use him as a test of this promising idea. Let Karnuth divine his soul’s True Name, then work his magic on him, and see what effect it had.

Given time, the Servant of Tongues learned their captive’s words, a greater challenge than usual, since the man was so far from the land that knew him and had listened to his people and absorbed the sound of them. But all things

were connected, by root and sky and river, and in time he aligned with the man's words.

Their captive's name was Touwam, and he didn't know the number of his years. But they could see he was neither old nor young, as well-built a man as any of them, and while he seemed to have gotten over his fear of them, he'd yet to get over his anger.

"We will not harm you," Karnuth assured him. "We have no wish to harm you."

"Then set me free and let me return to my home," Touwam said, scowling from man to man to man. "Only animals belong in cages."

"Soon," Karnuth promised. "Soon. But first you must drink this."

They gave him fresh water then, and when he frowned at the taste of the plants whose essences it had absorbed, they told him it would soothe his belly, which had rebelled against some of their food. As it began to put him to sleep, he fought it the entire time, staggering about like a wounded lion, and glaring at them with rage and sorrow, as if he'd never known that men could betray each other with such calm hearts.

They bound him to a litter and, in a procession of dozens, carried him out of the city. They bore him beyond the towers and temples, beyond the granaries and ovens, beyond the sharp-cornered shapes of bricks and quarried stone. They carried him west, where trees were still the tallest things in sight and everything was green except the birds.

This would be powerful magic, and powerful magic demanded a place of power for its working. The city was no longer such a place. Magic had become capricious and inconsistent there, as if the currents and forces of the earth had begun to retreat from the stink and clamor of too many people living too closely together.

It was better they take no chances. Better they felt the earth underfoot again, the way the shamans of the Ta'alun had in the days of old.

As Touwam continued to sleep like the dead, they formed a circle around him and filled the air with the smoke of sacred plants and the vibrations of chant and song. They pounded drums and blew horns, weaving a pathway between the worlds of the living and the dead. Karnuth danced along its borders until it swallowed him whole, and he fell to the ground shaking as if gripped by madness. In time, the seizure left him and he calmed, deathly still, as he passed into a world of spirits and demons and lesser gods, where none of them could follow.

They aligned him with their captive, ear-to-ear, each man's head nestled into the other's shoulder, Karnuth's feet pointing to the south and Touwam's to

the north. They backed off then, and took turns maintaining a steady pulse on a drum so Karnuth could find his way back when he was ready.

For a day, he was gone, and Touwam with him, both of them oblivious to light and darkness, food and water.

When at last Karnuth returned to the realm of the living, he could barely speak at all, let alone such a long name.

But soon enough he managed, and it was True.

The rites of binding and dominion took another two days.

When Touwam awoke, he clawed his way out of sleep as fiercely as he might from a grave. He crawled to consciousness as if from a second womb that expelled him into a world of sunlight and pain, while all around them, the birds took no notice and sang the only songs they needed. Trembling, he ate a little food, drank some water until it smoothed the rasp in his voice.

And when at last Touwam could speak, he did not need the Servant of Tongues to call them all his countrymen.



CHAPTER NINE

Her man Declan had made it back to the house and its grounds a day ahead of her. While he'd done his best to clean up the damage inside her tomb, Kemsiyet was still too aware of its violation. The air itself was tainted, and she took in the sights and the outrage on her own, building on her fury over what had happened in the house.

Her priest, dead. Her people, dead. Her sanctuary, profaned.

“Leave me be,” she'd told them, Declan and the new one, this Fiona she'd never seen before — frightened, though, the way they always were at first, that much at least was the same.

Declan had told her there would be a body he'd brought back from London, and had apologized, but explained to her how the tomb, cool and secure, was the best place for it. Still wrapped in plastic, it lay inside the door, and Kemsiyet felt a touch of pity for whoever the woman had been. Then she moved along, step by seething step.

She saw what was broken, what was dented or out of place. She righted what she could, and rued the rest. The worst of it was the absence of the tomb's guardians, the ancient men from ancient bogs, thrice-killed and returned to a semblance of life by some ambitious fool who'd had a tool but lacked the wisdom to use it.

The very tool that had been stolen from her.

Declan had spared her the sight of them, broken beyond hope and repair. The energies of the tomb had maintained them, but once he'd taken them outside, the last of their life had ebbed away. He said he'd watched their leathery brown eyelids close for the last time, saw the working of their jaws as they tried to speak. He had told them goodbye, and thanked them, in words he hoped they might understand, and in lieu of that, hoped they would understand his tone. Then he'd buried them, returning them to the earth they'd been denied for so long.

Kemsiyet had long ago made them her own, but it was only now, in their absence, that she realized what valued companions they'd been. They had dreamed, in their own way, and sometimes, in a landless place between full awakening and the repose of sleep, she thought she'd caught glimpses of it — dreams of battle and love and treachery and laughter.

She would miss them. And, in time, would probably forget them, just as she had already forgotten so much.

Like her sarcophagus inside the inner chamber — she no longer remembered its maker. Whoever it had been, they'd done it with care and great skill and perhaps even love. It had been fashioned from a single block of wood from a yew tree, shaped and shaved and hollowed out, ornately engraved with symbols of her land and theirs — scorpions and spirals, all-seeing eyes and triskelions — then lacquered and preserved for the ages. And while she couldn't remember who'd done it, she recalled they'd told her the yew was a sacred tree, a tree of life and regeneration, and that there could be no better one for her.

One last time, she touched the pendant she'd worn back from Greece, ever since it had been placed around her neck, given freely by the girl beside the sea. She took it off, let it dangle from her fingers by the thin leather cord.

For a few moments, she let her gaze drift about the chamber, then settled on an iron peg driven into one of the stone blocks, and hung it from that. It wanted to be there, *needed* to be there, another thread in the Lifeweb of energies woven through her tomb. There it would stay until she could deliver it the rest of the way.

And now her days and dreams belonged to the Judges again, her own plans for them gone like so many swirls of smoke and dust.



Declan had had plenty to keep him busy since their return, after driving the last weary miles once the ferry deposited them on the western side of the sea. The house had been cleaned up in their absence, bodies gone, blood too, with an astringent smell of bleach and other solvents lingering in the air. They only did cleanup, though, these people. They didn't do repairs.

He salvaged what he could, tossed what he couldn't, and did his best to disguise the rest. Then there was the body brought back from London. There was cleaning the car, using a heavy-duty vacuum to suck up the baking soda from the boot; returning the rental before it got too overdue. There was pacing in earnest and going over in his head anything he might have missed, because there was always something you could have overlooked.

And through it all, he'd made it a point to check in on Fiona every so often.

In the corner study on the ground floor, they'd put together a new workstation for her from the hardware that hadn't been damaged in the attack. She seemed more in her element, or at least glad to get back to something familiar.

She'd set up one computer with the side panel off, so she could swap the hard drives recovered from the house off Regent's Park in and out of the spare bays. With each of them, nineteen in all, it was the same frustrating story as the laptop they'd taken from the basement.

"It's not working," Fiona told him. "I can't get into a one of them. All password-protected, the whole disk, every single one."

She'd tried a few guesses, obvious choices like *Banefre* and *Arisen* and *Deathless*, just to say she had, and of course they hadn't worked. The passwords wouldn't have been set up to guard against random people off the street. Rather, they would've been intended to thwart those who already knew enough to guess the obvious.

And this was exactly the sort of situation Banefre's cult had in mind: a worst-case scenario with a total loss of control. Declan had no reason to think they wouldn't have gone all in: not merely a simple access password, but 128-bit encryption or better. In which case, even with tools and know-how that neither he nor Fiona possessed, they could try to brute-force it until they were Kemsiyet's age and still not be there.

"Okay, then," he said. "It'll have to be the other way. I'm sorry."

In her office chair, Fiona looked small and sad and pulled in on herself. "Will it hurt her?"

He could've lied. Could've sold the lie. But if he was wrong, she would soon enough *know* he'd lied, and he didn't want that between them.

"I hope not. But I can't say. I've never seen it done, never even heard of it being done. I just know it's something Kemsiyet can do."

"So you were planning for this all along. On the spot. Right down to looking for the one you thought looked the most right. That's kind of... amazing, really." But the flat way she said it had nothing to do with being impressed. It wasn't that kind of amazement. More like, *How could you be so bloodless after finding what we'd just found?*

"Sometimes you have to come up with contingencies you hope you never need to use," he said. "This is one of those times."

As he moved along to start gathering up what they needed, Declan thought he understood why it bothered Fiona so. It went beyond the expected apprehension, even revulsion. It would be more personal, wouldn't it? She saw herself out there, wrapped in plastic and carried across a sea and dumped on someone else's floor. Move the pieces around, play the game a bit differently, and that could've been her. A year from now, or two or ten, maybe it still could be.

It was bad enough someone had to die that badly the first time.

How much worse to be raised up, only to have to die all over again.



When he sliced open the layers of garbage bags and peeled them back, he was dismayed to see how much worse the body looked than when he'd first wrapped it. She'd gone from a cool basement to a cool tomb, but the hours in between had been unkind. He'd poured a lot of baking soda inside the bags as well, but by now it had been overwhelmed, the stench of decay as powerful as a physical presence.

He'd bought a camphor salve to slather beneath his nose, and Fiona as well, and it helped mask the odor. Kemsiyet did without. Would she even notice?

Once the young woman's body was freed, he wiped her face clean of soda, some of which remained a powder and some of which had mixed with the steamy moisture she'd exuded in the plastic to become a noxious paste. He'd thought it was for her dignity, but no, there was nothing of dignity anywhere in this, just necessity. He took her by the shoulders and, as gently as he could, scooted her back to sit upright against the wall, beneath a freshly printed page taped to the limestone.

He looked over his shoulder at Fiona, standing rigidly back with one arm crossed beneath her breasts, a pen and pad of paper clutched in her hand. Her other hand was clamped over her mouth.

An ethereal presence now, Kemsiyet came forward from the back of the tomb and settled down next to the corpse with her legs tucked up beneath her. She drew one arm around the young woman's shoulders to hug her close. She smoothed strayed red hairs away from the withering gray face; traced the backs of her fingers up one sunken cheek, and trailed her fingertips down the other. She rubbed her palm in warming circles on each stilled shoulder.

It was nothing innate. It was spellcraft, an utterance Kemsiyet had learned so far back she no longer remembered where or who had taught it to her. She remembered only the words and the way, intoning them in a murmur as if sharing a secret with the dead woman, the precursor to sharing a little bit of the life she had to spare.

Around the corpse grew the faintest suggestion of luminosity, as though a cloud had parted. The dead eyes eased open, pale and milky; the body drew a shallow, rasping breath. She gave a feeble kick, then one hand flopped to her neck as she remembered the horrid wound she'd been dealt. Kemsiyet held her, soothed her, stroked her hair and discreetly wiped away the strands that pulled free of her scalp.

Declan glanced back at Fiona to see how she was faring. An appalled sense of wonder — that was the nearest thing he had to calling it. When she saw he was looking, he gave her a crisp nod. *You're doing fine.*

"I won't hurt you," Kemsiyet told her. "Do you understand that?"

"Yes," she said, her voice like a whisper of driest dust.

Fiona moved closer so she could hear better, and readied her pen and paper. They had one chance at this, and he had every reason to believe it would be a slow and painstaking process that would weaken Kemsiyet more the longer it went on. Every question would cost her a little more.

The dead woman couldn't truly think, she could only retrieve. She would tell them anything they wanted to know, but strictly in a binary fashion. Yes/No — it was all they had to work with.

Kemsiyet glanced one more time at the paper taped to the wall, then began: "Do you remember the password to your computers?"

"Yes," came the dry voice again.

"Is it longer than twenty characters?"

"Yes."

"Is it longer than twenty-five characters?"

"No."

This wasn't a natural topic for her to pursue. Kemsiyet understood by now what computers were, and could use one to an extent. But she knew only as much as she'd been taught, and knowledge of one aspect didn't readily transfer to another. She made no leaps or spontaneous connections, not with this.

Declan and Fiona had scripted the questions for her as a series of conditional loops, the most expedient way they could think of to wrest the password from the dead woman one character at a time. The one bright spot: They were cautiously optimistic there would be a single password for everything. Banefre's people would've had no reason to keep each other out, only the rest of the world.

"Does the password consist of more letters than numbers?" Kemsiyet asked.

"Yes."

Twenty-four characters, mostly letters. They'd clarified that much. Now the hard part.

"Is the first character a letter?"

"No."

"Is the first character the numeral one?"

"No."

"Is the first character the numeral two?"

"Yes."

When she'd confirmed one character, the loop began again until they had the next. And so on and so on. Letters, numerals, symbols. Kemsiyet never faltered, never lost her place, never had to backtrack. As soon as Fiona had filled the twenty-four slots prepared on her pad, she raced from the tomb and toward the house.

A few minutes later, her voice came over his handset: "Declan? It's working for everything so far. The three drives I've got installed and the laptop, too. They've all opened right up."

He lifted his gaze to meet Kemsiyet's. "We're good, Mum. Let her go."

Kemsiyet held the body close again and murmured into her ear and kissed her brow as she drew back that spark of life. Like a dimming of a light, the woman

slumped back into death, final and true. And he hoped that, wherever she was returning to, she wasn't being judged too harshly.



It had been, without a doubt, the greatest feat of magic the world of the Ta'alun had ever witnessed. Some feats made for greater spectacle — to calm a raging storm was always accompanied by sound and fury — but these worked in accordance with natural law, and were most often a matter of merely nudging such phenomena in directions they were already inclined. Or would be if conditions were more favorable.

This was something else entirely. This was the binding of another's will, and bending it to one's own.

After Touwam had resurfaced from that lake of dreamless sleep, he lapsed into an agreeable silence. He remained content to observe the world around him and amuse himself, until he was directed to accomplish some specific task, which he did at once, without question. He did the work of slaves, chopping straw and mixing mud and baking bricks one day; hauling sledges and stacking stones the next.

Days of this, then they came to the *real* test, the only one that would truly matter. And when set him upon a slave brought back from the northeast, who had attempted to strike one of the masters at the dam, Touwam snatched up a stone small enough to fit his fist and killed the defiant slave with neither hesitation nor mercy, and did not stop until his brains were dashed upon the rocks.

M'kaal couldn't have asked the gods themselves for any better result.

It was easy to imagine an army just like Touwam, fearless and tireless and obedient, dedicated only to furthering the glory of the Ta'alun and seeing that their borders spread across the world to encompass the most distant mountains and the farthest seas. It was easy to imagine them sweeping west and east, north and finally south, fighting the wars that needed to be fought, subjugating the people that needed subduing. It was easy to envision them gathering slaves and conscripts, like a crop that renewed itself and might never need planting again.

A grand dream, anyway. But Karnuth could not share it.

"You and the rest give me praise I haven't earned," Karnuth told him. "With the working I have wrought upon this man, all I have proven is that it can be done. It may have been a great feat, but in the scheme of your vision it was only a small act, won at great effort. In time, in ritual. In substance. In the powers we draw from the earth."

Even now, many days later, Karnuth looked weakened and wan. As they ate their midday meal outside the temple hallowed to the Great Mother River, he chewed slowly, and needed both hands to hold his cup.

“This man from the south, he can only be a curiosity, not the first of thousands,” Karnuth said. “Take him if you want, use him as you wish. But if you foresee an entire army created this way, then you’re choosing to ignore the cost of binding just one man.”

M’kaal refused to accept it. Karnuth may have been a wise leader, with a father’s love, but he had lost the hardness of battle and bloody fields. To make the world and everything in it your own, you needed both, wisdom *and* hardness.

“If it can be done once, it can be done again,” M’kaal said. “And if it can be done again, it can be done faster, and easier.”

Karnuth managed a laugh. “Do it yourself once. Then see if you can still make such a claim.” He pushed a date into his mouth, savoring it as if every morsel was still needed to bring him fully back to life. “Time alone is against us. Say we cull the best men we can find from the quarries and the brick-ovens, and begin this very day. The first ones will be old men, and so will you, by the time we have enough warriors for the size of the army we would need.”

“Then find a better way,” M’kaal said. “You can do this. There was a time when you didn’t know that souls have True Names. It was less than a whisper of an idea to you. Until you found it to be true. This can be the same, if you keep looking.”

“Perhaps.” Karnuth lifted his cup and slurped. “But for now, your time will be better spent looking for allies for us. *They* are the future of our growth. People who can be persuaded to share our vision, not have it bound to them. So find them.”

He set his cup down and reached across to lay a fatherly hand on M’kaal’s arm.

“I see the disappointment on your face,” Karnuth said. “I’ve always thought it was a face that shared too much for a warlord. That’s good when you want to show fury, not as good when it would be better for you to conceal what’s in your heart.”

M’kaal lowered his gaze in deference. “Then I can only hope my disappointment does not offend you.”

Karnuth gifted him with a father’s forgiving smile. “I could never be offended by something I feel so keenly myself. Perhaps it would help if I tell you the truth as I came to understand it, as bitter as it may be for you to swallow. To create an army of the kind you foresee... thousands strong, all at once... the rites of binding would have to be performed as part of some other great

working. They would need to be backed by a source of power so tremendous I cannot imagine how we would summon it, or control it if we did. If we made but one mistake, it could consume us. The risk is too great.”

While this may have been the truth, M’kaal found its taste far from bitter. So, in addition to allies, perhaps he should go off in search of such a power, too. Was that not what he had just now been charged to do?

Allies came in many guises, and wore many names.



CHAPTER TEN

The life of death was ebbing from him. Just a bit. The potency of his rebirth was fading, like a once roaring fire that settled down to smoldering coals. This wasn't a bad thing. Coals lasted longer, and still scorched whoever touched them.

For now, it was an advantage, making it easier for Rawhead to move among the swine. They were less apt to feel him coming. They didn't like to deal directly with him, ticket agents and their servile ilk — he could feel their instinctive revulsion, their eager rush to send him on his way — but he could have made it so much worse for them.

He could have stared into their eyes, unblinking, and imagined the steam rising from their entrails on a cold spring morning. But he didn't.

He could have sat next to a mother with a pram and indulged in a waking dream about the roasting of her infant. But he chose not to.

He could have leaned over the shoulder of a doughy business commuter and savored thoughts of the juicy pop of the man's eyes between his teeth. But he declined, because it would not serve him.

For now, let him pass as unnoticed as he could. For now, let him be content to relive the symphony of suffering he'd conducted in that Waterford pub. Because it was mere prelude to what could come.

And so he made the eastern crossing of the Irish Sea without incident, alone on the ferry's deck with a shipful of people happy to leave him to it. He watched the sun go down on the darkening waters and wondered how many drowned corpses it would take for him to be able to walk to Wales and never wet his feet.

After the ferry deposited him at the harbor in Fishguard, Rawhead hiked in the direction of the train station. It was out here, in the salt air and brisk evening breezes sweeping in off the sea, that he found himself walking a minute or two behind a traveler he'd first glimpsed on the ferry. A pale, thick-lipped young man with closely cropped hair, his solitude was more pronounced than anyone else's. It took

a few extra moments for Rawhead to catalogue everything he was seeing, but the fragments of the picture came together soon enough. A backpack — yes, he knew what that was. A walking stick, he knew what that was, too. The young man loped ahead with a long stride and flipped the hood of a thick green jumper over his head.

He looked to be roughly the same size, height and weight — was that Fate?

That they boarded the same train bound for Cardiff — was that Fate, too?

Or did it even matter, and was Fate what they both made of it?

Unlike the ferry, on the train Rawhead was forced to ride *with* them. No choice but to marinate in the stink of their bodies and the reek of their breath. When the urge to rend flesh and crush bone grew too much, he found that it helped to retreat to the toilet until the compulsion passed.

It helped, too, to have something to focus on: the conundrum of himself. Most everything he needed to make his way in the world long enough to do the goddess' work was in one pocket or another, including the papers he'd taken from the house of his rebirth. Passport, driving license, the plastic cards these mongrels used for their transactions in lieu of anything of actual worth.

It was the ones with pictures he still had to study. Locked in the toilet as the train sped along the tracks, he peered at the photos of the face belonging to this body he was in, then turned his attention to the mirror. That was not his face, even though it moved when he did. That was not his face, just the one from the papers. That was not his face, and yet... it was.

A single name went with the face — he had to keep reminding himself of that. *Ewan Hollister*. That was not his name, either. *Ewan Hollister*. Such an ugly jumble of syllables should never be his name. But he would have to pretend it was.

And the floor rattled beneath him, a quiver of steel wheels over the rails.

Once he felt sure of his control again, he left the toilet and returned to his seat, a new one this time, from which he was better able to see the backpacker. As the train speared through the night, he watched this fellow traveler for miles, slumped into his seat and perusing his phone as mindlessly as a cow would graze a field.

In time, Rawhead grew bored with watching — it was no good if he couldn't dream of flavors and aromas — and, for now, traded the sight of him for other papers, folded into another pocket. Slick paper, shiny pictures... pages from a magazine. He scarcely remembered tearing the article free in the house of his rebirth, in those hours he'd spent gathering what he needed to devote himself to purpose and preparing to emerge into the world.

The pages must have meant something to this body he was in, and because that seemed like it could only be a flickering memory that no longer served, he came close to throwing them away before he left the house. Until he stopped to actually read them. Then he read them again, with a growing understanding that while it may have been an old memory, it was anything but obsolete. It had been plucked for

service by those higher layers inside him whose vision extended far beyond that of his eyes.

Somewhere deep within, before he'd even known his name, he had known *this*. He'd known where his path should lead before he had even set foot outside the door.

She works in a darkness illuminated only by her fingertips. Her hands are her eyes as well as her tools. That was how it began, this profile of an American artist by the name of Jessalyn Blake.

At first glance, the pictures showed no one who wouldn't have been better off rotting. She had the look of a tall woman, her hair long, blonde, streaked with gray. If not for her smile, she might have looked dead. Her eyes were never open, and she never seemed to be looking straight ahead. She was paired with a man in one photo, as she was apparently paired with him in life; Michael Ortiz, the caption named him.

In other photos, she was posed with relics of her own making, heads and horses and figures that had no counterpart in life at all. In some she was left out entirely, the pieces shown on their own, apart from their creator. A few were unfinished works in progress, clay in the midst of being shaped. Others were complete, the clay either an end unto itself or, as often as not, a mere stepping stone to castings made of bronze.

Bronze.

Perhaps Fate had its hand in even this. Because what use would he ever have had for a journal about art when there was only one age of art that mattered? Why would he ever have noticed this Jessalyn Blake, a woman not even whole, who played with clay like a child? Why would her life, on the other side of the world, raise so much as a flicker of interest when there were millions of lives so much closer that he could ruin?

Then he realized what Jessalyn Blake could do.

He realized what mighty works he could do *through* her.

And somewhere beyond the confines of this fetid earth, Ammut, the Devourer... Ammut, goddess of oblivion... Ammut, she whom he both reviled and revered... was surely pleased.

As it sped through the night, now and again the train made its stops. People got off, people got on, and the new ones were as loathsome as the old. His instincts had kept him bound for Cardiff, where he would change trains and board one for London. Then opportunity presented itself before he'd got even halfway there, when he saw the backpacker disembarking at some lonely station in the wilds. He hadn't heard the name of the place being announced, and it probably wouldn't have meant anything to him if he had.

But he knew the way these soft creatures thought, and sometimes they weren't wrong: What were journeys for, if not making a detour when something of use and interest came along?

While the train rolled away beneath the stars, Rawhead remained on the platform while the backpacker hurried inside the station for the toilet. It gave him time

to take in the night and conclude that if anyone else was around, they weren't close enough to matter. He felt ripples of awareness more animal than human, and his ears pricked at the sound of breezes through leaves. *There*, it told him. *That direction*, it showed him. *The trees will be densest over there*.

The backpacker was on his phone when he emerged from the station. Rawhead listened with marginal interest. Some things in his life were going right. Other things in his life were going wrong. None of them could have mattered less. With a crisp clack of his walking stick against the platform, the backpacker set off into the night.

Rawhead gave him a few moments to trade the light for the shadows, then set off after him, silent as a leopard on padded paws. His awareness was preternaturally feral, homing in on blood and breath and heartbeat, as he closed the gap and snatched away the walking stick from behind. He used it to crack the man over the head, then hurled it aside and seized the backpack. He whirled to one side to topple the man off-balance and fling him to the ground. The traveler landed awkwardly, on his pack, and Rawhead followed him down before he even knew what was happening. The first savage clout across the jaw left him insensible. The next may have broken something.

As quickly as he'd pounced, Rawhead was up again, dragging him by the neck across concrete and open ground, until he'd hauled the man, backpack and all, into the thicket of trees and underbrush he'd spotted earlier.

The backpacker was still alive, but unconscious. Dying? Rawhead didn't know, and gave him one more blow to the side of the head, to remove all doubt.

He removed the backpack first and set it aside, then stripped the corpse of its clothes, folded them, stashed them in the pack with everything else. He would go through it all later, deciding what he could use and tossing the rest. Next, his own clothes came off. He smelled water nearby, and would be able to clean himself more easily than he could his clothing. When he had everything bundled together, he set it aside, out of harm's way.

All but the pocketknife he'd carried since leaving London.

He worked it in beneath the breastbone and sawed away. It wasn't the best tool for the job, but he made do. He was determined. All he really needed was room enough to get his hand up in there, beneath the ribs, plus a little extra room, besides.

His hand wouldn't be coming out empty. The heart on its own would be about the size of his fist. He worked it with the blade and brute strength, and when it was ready to come out, the exit was well greased.

His teeth had an easier go of it.

And it was glorious. The heart may have been stilled, but the vitality in it still pulsed. He took it all in and felt the life of death resurgent within him.

He hadn't needed to, not yet. But to waste the opportunity might have been the closest thing to a sin he could commit.



Once more the belly of the Great Mother River swelled with its dependable surge from the south, and they were ready for it. They took to the water with the new boats and barges that had been a year in the making, eight-and-ten in all. Some carried a crew of six, the largest ones eight, a formidable force for exploring the coastlines of the Northern Sea.

Under M'kaal's command, they were prepared to bring peace to all those who would accept it, terror to those who would not.

They had trained endlessly in these same waters of home, but the feeling was different now that it was real, like riding a horse across open plains for the first time after training inside a pen. The river's banks slid past, the green trees nodding at them as they sailed by, and all around them wafted the heady smells of water and mud. There was glory even in this, because who had ever dared to do such a thing, on such a scale?

At the front of the flotilla, D'jaal's boat stayed beside him. His brother laughed at him across the water, taking delight in urging the crew of his slimmer craft to nose ahead of the wider barge that carried M'kaal, just to show that he could. They might as well have been boys again, racing along the streets of home or across the mud flats left when the river was low, or up the stairs of the brick towers, from the bottom terrace to the top. Because he was younger, D'jaal's legs had always been shorter, but out here, finally, he was equal, and he reveled in it.

And M'kaal laughed back.

It might not last, for there was no knowing what lay ahead, but today, at least, he had never felt more free upon the face of the earth.

They pulled in along a curve in the river the first night, beaching the boats on the sand, then were off again the next dawn. The last of this leg of the journey carried them through a region where the river split off into branches like the veins of a leaf. Between them, huge silt deposits rose out of the water and resembled the graves of giants.

They took care to keep the boats grouped together, M'kaal always opting to steer them into the wider branch, if there was a choice. All channels seemed to lead to the sea, though, as the horizon ahead filled with blue, the sea merging with the sky as if the world had no more use for land at all. When the sun was overhead, this final branch of the river widened until the river was no more, and they were spewed out into the vastness of the Northern Sea.

He had never seen so much water. None of them had, and for a time they could only stare out across the rolling blue emptiness of it. It was as though

they had found themselves adrift on the primal waters of creation, which the most ancient deities had stirred with chaos, until it heaved up the bodies of giants and fallen gods, that decayed and hardened into land. Yet in their decay the seeds of life embedded in their flesh had sprouted, and given rise to animals and birds and man.

Here. It may have happened right here.

M'kaal had his crew steer left, into the west, and the rest of the boats followed. It had been decided long before they left: They would always stay in sight of the coastline and, until it was time to turn around and go back, keep it to their left.

He found it strange: The longer they were out here, caught between the sun and the chasms at the bottom of the sea, the more he felt exposed in a way he never had on land. Here, there was no place to hide, and even if he saw no one following their progress from the shore, that didn't mean they were not being watched.

They were. He was certain of it.

It did not feel malevolent.

But it did not feel caring, either.

More like it was the gaze of something profoundly curious to see what they might do next.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Safety first.

Fiona took the laptop and the hard drives she'd brought back from the house on Regent's Park, and cloned them over to a batch of new drives she'd had Declan buy while he was off taking care of the rental car. A few of the originals were themselves backups, but she trusted nothing. The last thing they needed was the wrong one to fail.

Safety second, too. She relabeled and bagged and boxed the originals, and into the closet they went. Let the clones be their working copies.

She installed a few at a time and gave them a quick inspection for an overview of what was there. It looked to be a treasure trove of information if you knew what you were looking for, and a hard slog if you didn't. Extensive cult history; summaries of relic recovery operations; leads they had on other relics, extant as well as rumored; information on other cults and individuals; all manner of research on various and sundry topics; a deep well of financial data going back centuries. Clone another five of her, and there would still be enough here to keep all of them busy for a year.

The main priority, though, was the laptop recovered from the basement. They'd been shooting video directly to disc, and it was no challenge to find it... merely a quick and simple matter of a date range search for the most recently created files. Within the last ten days, there was only one video.

She previewed the first minute to verify that this was what they were after, then shut it off until they all could watch. Although crowded around the laptop wasn't going to be ideal. She rummaged around for the proper cables, then plugged the Monitor Out port into a 24-inch high-definition display, and the Audio Out into the desktop sound system.

Time to call in the audience, then, and she braced herself for it. She'd quickly got accustomed to being around Declan. He had a centered, easygoing way about him, as long as he wasn't choking the life out of you. Kemsiyet was another matter, and would still take some getting used to.

Being in her presence was like everything Fiona had ever felt about being beneath the stars, all at once. Connection and eternity, insignificance and melancholy. She was so much more than mortal, and yet, if you didn't let yourself be too awed by that, you could see how far she fell short of being wholly human, and that she knew it, and perhaps in the quietest moments missed it.

She had a way of looking at you that was like a god watching an insect. The god could've crushed the bug, but didn't. Was curious about the bug, while feeling secure in its superiority to it. And even if the god couldn't entirely understand what passed for the bug's thoughts, it still cared about the bug's welfare.

What strange dynamics: a bug that aspired to serve a god who seemed weary of being one.



Once they were together, an audience of three, Fiona started the video again.

The background was unmistakable — the basement temple below a houseful of casualties. The lighting could have been better, but it was adequate, and anyway, she was fast finding out that there were plenty of things in the world you didn't want to see too clearly.

It was all raw footage, a single camera, a single take. They hadn't lived long enough for edits. The camera had been tripod-mounted from the outset, because the framing was stable. Couldn't say the same about the people. Eight or ten — it was hard to get an accurate count — they all had the shell-shocked look of survivors who'd been through a war.

Which, she supposed, they had. What was war, if not massacres? What was war, if not betrayal and sneak attacks?

"We're it, we're all that's left," a man said, addressing the camera directly. He was middle-aged, with a long face gone haggard, a stern beak of a nose, and a gray-ing goatee. From Manchester, by his accent. *"This is the handiwork of Setka the Lingerer."*

At that, she gave Declan a puzzled look: *Who?* He held up his hand: *Later.* But it was clear that both he and Kemsiyet knew the name.

"They came to us under an agreement of truce and reconciliation. It was a lie, all of it. We didn't wake Banefre. He'd only been back in henet for six weeks. We didn't see as there'd be any need for it. Setka wasn't going to be with them. There shouldn't have been any need for it. Who does this? Who comes into your home and does this?"

The distraught spokesman went on to relate what they knew already: the number of dead and, far more devastating, that their master had been destroyed in repose, along with the organs that had been stored in the canopic jars, and finally, as Declan had guessed, that their intent was to bring him back by any means necessary. Banefre still existed as spirit. As long as they provided him with a new body, he could make the Descent again... and set to right all the wrongs that had been done them.

“Oh god,” Fiona said. “That’s him.”

The camera had shifted to a younger fellow that the spokesman addressed as Ewan, explaining how he was selflessly surrendering his life for their greater good.

She tried to match the man in the video with the one who’d invaded the tomb. It *was* him, yet then again it wasn’t. He had the same trim build, the same sandy hair, the same thin, well-defined features. But the fellow in the video appeared hesitant, unsure of himself despite his convictions. Frightened, even. Whatever personality was inside him here was gone by the time she’d encountered him in the flesh, driven out and replaced by something monstrous.

As the video went on to show how it was done, Fiona watched as much as she could, and looked away when she needed to.

By the light of four fires burning in braziers, Ewan stripped away his clothes and exchanged them for a modest loincloth. He was sweating, his body gleaming orange in the firelight. He drank a cup of some concoction, then lay back atop the strange platform they’d seen, like a sandstone wall, narrow, just wide enough to support his neck and back and hips while his arms and legs dangled toward the floor. It looked terribly uncomfortable...

Then she saw the reason for it when they set out four large bronze bowls to catch the blood. From a small wooden box, they removed something to set in each of the bowls, but none of them watching now could see what it was. With an obsidian knife, a man who appeared to be functioning as their priest cut Ewan deeply, opening him up high on each thigh, at his groin, and in each armpit. He cried out at the first one, was stoic for the rest. His blood spurted and splashed, then ebbed to a steady flow that pulsed and dwindled, as over the next few minutes he died to an accompaniment of chant beneath clouds of smoke from incense cast into the braziers.

For a time they let him be, while the chants continued.

After sixty-six minutes — Fiona had no idea if that was significant — they tended to him again. They anointed him with oils and salves. They prepared wrappings but left them off for the moment. As the camera zoomed in, they picked up one of the bowls and the priest plunged in an apparatus like a pair of forceps to retrieve the object they’d dropped into it before the bloodletting.

Shaped a bit like a walnut, it dripped thick crimson. Whatever it was, the blood had revived it. It had legs that were now squirming. Beetles, were they? Scarabs?

Declan turned to Kemsiyet with a look of alarm. “Mum? Any idea what that is?”

Using the forceps, the priest pushed the wriggling thing into one of the incisions made in Ewan’s groin. Others quickly followed it up with wrappings, as if to close off any chance of exit.

Kemsiyet was leaning in close, rapt with attention. Even she didn’t seem sure. “Uter, I think.”

Uter... Fiona knew the word from her studies. They were relics fashioned from once-living tissue: flesh, bone, parts of bodies, even small creatures in their entirety. Creepy stuff, really.

And they moved along to the rest. Three more bowls, three more incisions, three more scarabs, if that was indeed what they were.

“I wonder if Banefre might not have made relics from bits cut from the core of his own body,” Kemsiyet said. “Things that no one who meant him harm would have known to destroy.”

Then what were the beetles — the means of carrying these bits deeper inside the body, and anchor the old flesh to the new? These rites were of their own devising, and to simply watch, even for Kemsiyet there was no way of knowing the purpose behind everything... only that it had failed. Whether the person who could have performed the rite flawlessly was already dead, or it was flawed in some fundament of design, it had failed in the most catastrophic way possible.

The ritual began to intensify around the body, the call back to life escalating to a fevered shout-and-response between the priest and the rest of the survivors. Until the corpse began to twitch, first a leg, then an arm.

Knowing what was coming made it that much more difficult to watch. She shut her eyes at the first cry from him, an agonized bellow beyond the capabilities of a mortal body to make, so loud it distorted the camera’s microphone input.

It was the first cry of many.

When she opened her eyes, Ewan was off the slab, and something else entirely. She wondered how it was even possible that his hand could be buried in someone else’s belly like that, as if he’d punched through them in a furious effort to grab them by the spine. *This* was the face she remembered.

“They don’t even realize yet what they have done,” Kemsiyet said. “They still think they can get back control over him. They don’t even see what they have made.”

Which made it even worse. Fiona had known matters could unfold like this even during the first moments of a Descent that *hadn’t* gone wrong. Jolted into a frenzy of consciousness by a surge of life force so powerful it was like a lightning strike, the Arisen sometimes killed members of their own cult upon awakening, if the people weren’t careful. It was energy, and it had to go somewhere.

What a terrible thing to believe you’d succeeded, to think you were so close to that moment of triumph. What a terrible thing to die knowing you were so wrong.

While down in the temple among their dead, she’d wondered why they hadn’t all scattered as soon as he’d gone berserk. Now she knew. They venerated what they thought he still was. They were lambs who had led themselves to slaughter.

In the chaos, the camera tripod was knocked over. She’d been waiting for that. The view was lost then, little going on in-frame at this point. But the microphone still worked. Somewhere beyond the lens, people pleaded and shouted, screamed and choked and died. She got the impression that he’d incapacitated some of them so he could get back to them in his own time.

Eventually he gained control of himself. She heard a sound like an animal’s breath, deep and hoarse and panting. When at last it slowed, it became more like a man’s. This

was followed by footsteps, the slap of bare feet on stone, and the noise of scraping — shoes, perhaps, the people who wore them being dragged into one group.

They were not all dead, obviously. Some were in pain. Others sobbed with a despair whose depths she couldn't imagine. A conversation had begun between them, but she could discern little of what they were saying.

Fiona wasn't sure when she consciously made the connection: that these people for whom she felt such pity were the monsters he'd brought with him, whose remains had ended up hacked and pulped across floors and hallways just outside this room.

"He's making them into his Fasad now, isn't he?" Declan shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "How are they going along with this? I can't believe they'd do it willingly."

Right — she knew this. Companions in death couldn't be enslaved against their will. They had to be willing. They had to want it. Although, with the Shuankhsen, their subjects could be brought to acceptance by trickery, bribery, threats.

And Kemsiyet apparently had better ears. "He tells them if they refuse, he will send their souls as sacrifices to the Devourer."

Fiona had to leave the room when the screaming started again, prolonged and in earnest. The Rite of the Engraved Heart, they called it. Like a stylus of smoke and ice, etching the name of your new master on your soul. Given how long it went on, the Shuankhsen seemed to enjoy taking his time.

Declan found her later, standing at the kitchen windows and staring out at the trees in the back. Toward the closed mouth of the tomb at the bottom of the stairs. The video was over, she surmised. He and Kemsiyet had gleaned as much as they could from it.

"Are you going to be all right?" he asked.

She wasn't sure how to answer. "I'd like to think so."

"You can bow out if you want. You wouldn't be blamed if you did."

"What, you don't have enough of a skeleton crew here already, won't be happy until you're down to yourself?" The thought made her laugh, or close enough. "Bow out. You tell me how is it I'm supposed to see these things, then go back to pretending they're not out there? Tell me that, and maybe I will."

"I could tell you," he said, "but you don't strike me as the type to go all-in for raging alcoholism. Sorry."

"Well, now. Giving me the benefit of the doubt rather than going for the throat with a drunken mick joke. You're a man of hidden depths, you are."

"With a message to relay, too," he said. "Pack yourself a go-bag tonight. We're off to London again in the morning."

Her stomach gave an unpleasant lurch. "Not that house again."

Declan shook his head. "No. She means to see Setka. The Lingerer. If we're going to have any chance of getting this mess cleaned up, we need to meet with the ones who caused it."

CHAPTER TWELVE

When Fiona asked him to tell her what a Lingerer was, he thought it wise to take care in the way he answered. Declan didn't want to lead her on this one. Let her make up her own mind.

He supposed that in any system, no matter how repressive, there were always the ones who found a way to make a go of refusing to play by the rules. So it was with those who came to be known as Lingerers, probably the most despised label they could slap on you in the shadowy world of the Arisen.

The thing was, Declan wasn't without sympathy. Maybe he saw it all differently because of how he'd always viewed his mission: keeping bad things from happening. Helping to contain one of the worst things this system had produced across an epic timescale of generating bad things. Even if he'd now fallen down on the job at doing this much.

Immaterial, that, in the greater scheme. He'd never cared about perpetuating the status quo for its own sake. For the oldest participants, it was a shitty system all the way around. You say you want immortality? Here's the price of it, luv: an eternity of slavery doing our bidding, with a little time for yourself dribbled out every fourteen to fifteen centuries, just because we're nice. Oh, and too bad for you if something else comes up at the same time. There'll always be the year 3473 to look forward to if the latest sabbatical doesn't work out. Plenty of time to find yourself later... that is, if a Shuankhsen doesn't hunt you down and eat you first.

So, while Declan was all for devotion to duty, just say he was in their position — what *would* he do? Take the cheater's way out?

That was how you got to be a Lingerer. All those unfathomably ancient relics they were supposed to gather up and deliver back to the Underworld? To a Lingerer, those weren't the mission. They were *food*. Destroy them, and the act released all that stored-up Sekhem for the taking. They ingested it and it kept them going. It meant their life cycle never had to run down. Their life force never depleted to the

point of having to return to their literal sleep of the dead. They remained alive to the world for as long as they wanted... and were generally loathed for it.

Lingerer — the term gave Fiona something to search for, and he was glad of it. The video had really done a number on her head, one of those things that, once you'd seen it, you couldn't *unsee*. She'd needed something to jump into, and this was it. Call it occupational therapy.

When bringing back the hard drives from the Regent's Park house, he'd figured they would be a source of valuable information, but until Fiona started digging in and feeding him frequent updates, he hadn't realized the extent of it.

Banefre's cult had, she discovered, been gathering detailed information on Setka and his people for decades. A good deal of it predated the computer age, and consisted of scans of hardcopy reports.

There was also the disquieting discovery that they'd gathered information on a great many other Arisen and their cults, too... including the one under this very roof, right down to dossiers on individual members, Declan among them. Although not Fiona, probably because she was too new to it all. For her sake, he was relieved. She didn't need the extra worry. They'd even catalogued home addresses, the nosy pricks. Banefre, once he'd gone wrong, had wanted to take out as many of Kemsiyet's people as he could before hitting the grand prize of the tomb, and everything he'd needed to find them was already compiled.

"Why?" Fiona eventually asked. "Why did they want all this? What were they getting up to all this time?"

What and why indeed? As Declan recalled him from their trip to London a few years ago, to recover the chalice from the British Museum, Banefre had demonstrated an evolved sense of fairness and generosity with his people, but it was shackled to a resolutely stern demeanor overall. Banefre had seemed not only pleased to be who and what he was, but convinced of the absolute rectitude of it — a master of mortals who could conceive of no greater existence than to be a slave in service to the greatest empire the world had forgot. In this, he'd seemed entirely self-contained. He had no interest in learning anything more about himself. Nothing of his ancient past mattered. He was all in for present purpose.

And yet... .

He'd liked to float along the canal, this one little pleasurable indulgence. Maybe it was all he dared allow himself. Any more would open a door he'd rather keep nailed shut.

All right, follow where that led. The psychology, the habits, the overreach.

"Just speculating, mind you," Declan said, "but suppose Banefre had them doing this in the interest of purity. Suppose he made it his secondary mission to *enforce* purity. If somebody strayed, stopped keeping their eyes on the prize, he wanted to know about it. A bit like the old Catholic Inquisition."

Now Fiona looked to be on surer ground. “The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith — that’s what they changed the name to. It sounds nicer.”

“Well, that’s what you do when you have a branding problem. Same principle, though. You have to root out the heresy and squash it, or else it might spread. The idea that someone might start seeing things differently than you, that’s the bane of some people’s existence.”

The Deathless had, after all, just one name for the only one of their kind who’d broken free of the system entirely, to live apart from it under his own will. *The Heretic*, they called him, and he may not even have been real. That the myth of him survived at all meant that some, at least, had a need to believe he was.

By now, Declan was intrigued enough to put on tea and set up a workstation of his own, side by side with Fiona. The more they dug, the more there was to find.

Banefre and his cult had taken enough of an interest in Setka and his cult to spend years maintaining an ongoing surveillance program. There was an archive of photograph and video reconnaissance from over a dozen locations in the U.K. alone, as well as during trips to France, Belgium, Germany, Spain, and more. There was also a sizeable collection of incident reports, fairly dry — and no doubt biased — accounts of clashes and skirmishes when Banefre’s people had tried to intercept this or that relic. Sometimes successfully, sometimes not, and sometimes with casualties.

More recently, they had been trying to not only undermine Setka’s activities, but his very existence. They’d employed hackers in an effort to disrupt financial conduits, and while the evidence was more fragmentary, it looked as if they’d initiated a series of government bribes in an effort to call attention to the ownership of the high rise where Setka made his headquarters, with fabricated evidence of ties to known terrorist groups.

“I think it’s safe to conclude these people had themselves a serious bug up their bum about them,” Fiona said.

Declan nodded. “Makes me wonder how long it’s really been going on.”

She tapped her screen. “Since the 1950s, looks like.”

“Is that common era or BCE?”

She gave him a suspicious look, like maybe he was setting her up for a laugh. “How’s that again?”

“The pleasure of your company is a delight, and no mistake, but if you’d been around 6000 years and more, even you might bear a few grudges. But here’s the thing. Hatreds may run deep with these people, but they’ve got these dodgy memories, so you get situations where all that two of them know is that they hate each other, only nobody remembers why. Bad blood built up over lifetimes takes on a life of its own.”

And it was past late, Declan realized, even if they weren’t traveling tomorrow morning. When they gave each other an infectious round of yawns, he knew it was time to pack it in for the night.

Fiona went upstairs to one of the rooms she'd made her own for the time being, while he stayed behind a bit longer. Lingered, right. Since they'd come back from London, he felt a compulsion to do a sweep through the news every few hours.

Something was loose in the world that shouldn't have been. It was one of a kind, and by its works he would know it. It left clues. If you were an enemy of all life on earth, you didn't steal a thing like that and not use it.

The people from the pub down in Waterford would tell as much. If they could. If they weren't busy clawing out their eyes or poking out their ear drums or just sitting there jabbering to themselves, trying to sort out a million thoughts at once.

The authorities only saw a public health hazard, and speculations ran rampant. A gas leak, an hallucinogen that got loose, a terrorist attack, a military experiment in populace disruption. Lots of theories and yelling, no answers. He wished he could help more directly.

That, as much as anything, accounted for Fiona's need to stay. He would've bet money on it. Few things could have been lonelier in the world than seeing something like that on the news, knowing you were one of only three people who knew what to make of it. And that there was nothing you could share about how to make it better.

He couldn't find any reports of anything like it since.

Although he stopped at a report of the body of a German backpacker found near a railway station in southern Wales. The heart had been cut from the chest, and was nowhere to be found at the scene.

There's our boy, come home again, he thought. You fucker. You absolute fucker.



As the men of the Ta'alun sailed west along the coast of the Northern Sea, at one settlement they were greeted well, if warily. At another the welcome was hostile, and so they left fire and smoke, corpses and ruin, in their wake before they continued farther west. They chose landmarks to commit the spot to memory so that, if anyone was still there on their return, they would take the rest captive and haul them back home for lives of mud-brick and stone.

On the ninth day, they at last made a stop that would have brought a smile to Karnuth's face. *This* was what he had sent them out to find. *This* was what he meant by alliances.

Nestled into a cove dense with trees and with a wide beach, they were a tribe of many hundreds, and had slaves of their own. Their chieftain was named Urseth, a towering man with an unruly beard threaded with gray, powerful limbs and a booming voice and a deep chest draped with clattering necklaces made of seashells.

“The Ta’alun,” he said, after the Servant of Tongues announced to him who they were, and that they came in friendship, bringing riches and opportunity. “We have heard of you. There are stories you have built hills of your own, tall enough to scrape the sky.”

“Not quite as tall as that,” M’kaal said, and rather liked the man, because he was open and seemed agreeable yet still had a shrewdness in his eye. “But we haven’t run out of bricks yet.”

As Urseth’s people crowded around and watched and chattered, they presented him with gifts. He had a particular love for a pair of armbands made of bone, boiled and shaped and carved and inlaid with shavings of blue stone, but he found them too small to go around his upper arms, and so he wore them just above his thick wrists and was proud.

He grumbled a moment while he thought of how he might reciprocate, then snatched off one of his necklaces and offered it in return. When he glanced down and saw that he looked no lighter than before, Urseth laughed and peeled off another two, then made a show of darting among his people and taking more from whoever wore them, and happily flinging them to the rest of M’kaal’s men.

M’kaal himself had no use for the smelly things, and found no beauty in them to admire, but wore them anyway. Because, while they were a lesser people in every way, they’d given what they had.

“Then I will take your necklaces, too, when we’re away from here,” D’jaal told him, as he fondled the pink and pale brown shells of his own. “And whenever I wear them, they will carry me back to the sea.”

He thought of his brother back on the river, and on these rolling, limitless plains of water waiting for them at the river’s end. D’jaal had always, one way or another, lived in his shadow. Now, at last, he was casting his own, in his third-and-twentieth year.

“You love being out here like this,” M’kaal said. “It aligns with your heart, does it not?”

D’jaal smiled, and still, he looked so young. “My heart. My spirit. My essence. My shadow and my name. It aligns with all of me. Already I’ve seen things no one back home ever has or ever will. I lie awake at night wondering what else is out here, waiting for my eyes to behold it.”

Strong words. M’kaal felt the power behind them. “Then maybe this is what Fate has brought you to. This will be your realm to continue conquering once we have our feet planted firmly in it.”

He embraced his brother then, because, if you possessed the wisdom to read them, the signs were everywhere that the gods had noticed and approved and bestowed their continued favor. They could hope for nothing better.

As they day went on, further gifts were exchanged as Urseth's people grew more curious about the newcomers in their midst. They were fascinated, too, by Touwam, and asked what manner of man he was, because they'd never seen his like before.

M'kaal did his best to make them understand that there were a great many such people to the south, and how far away they were — that even as distant as their seaside village was from the city of the Ta'alun, it was a far longer distance than that, one that might take many cycles of the moon to travel. It could even be much greater than that, because they had yet to reckon how far south actually reached. Urseth laughed with both disbelief and delight, because this was the first time he'd ever encountered anyone who had been able to tell him the world was so big.

As day ebbed toward dusk, he had his people butcher a foursome of goats to be roasted over a glowing bed of embers. As they ate their fill and sat facing each other, ringed by their people, he and M'kaal spoke through the Servant of Tongues of how each might benefit the other.

He'd already seen what the artisans of the Ta'alun could create, M'kaal reminded him. Their adornments would make him a man of even greater standing. And, as allies, the Ta'alun would not only be their allies in trade, but their allies in war, as well.

At this, Urseth laughed his great booming laugh, mused the thought over, and called to one of the elder women nearby. He chatted with her for a moment, then turned to them again.

"She had a grandfather who remembered a war," Urseth said. "Us, now... we've never fought one."

"Then we will teach you how," M'kaal promised.

Throughout the evening, it was give and take. Terms offered and things wanted, things accepted and terms spurned. M'kaal was adamant that the Ta'alun be able to use their cove and beach and inland as a staging ground for launching future explorations to the west. They could send men here to live, and train the tribe's young men how to fight. They could equip them with better spears than they had now, and show them how to make war clubs that would cause the faces of their enemies to turn pale.

Urseth laughed again. "We have no enemies."

"You will," M'kaal promised. "You have only been lucky. Sooner or later, luck runs out on us all. Enemies never do."

Urseth wasn't much interested in their gods, but he had a tremendous interest in their boats. They looked far more capable than his people's own, and would give them greater range away from shore when going out to fish,

and take them out to the deeper waters where bigger fish could be found and battled on board.

“Then we will leave a boat behind for you,” M’kaal said. “And if you send back with us people who wish to learn, our builders will teach you how to make your own, and they can return here with more.”

The price that caused Urseth the greatest concern was M’kaal’s insistence that he would need to choose some forty of his people to go back and work for the glory of the Ta’alun over the next year. Because there was always more straw to be cut, more bricks to be made, more towers to build. After their year, they could go home, to be replaced by forty more. If he wished to gather them from other area tribes, that would be as acceptable as sending their own. But forty would be the price of annual tribute.

With hesitation, Urseth looked about at his people, fed and happy. “They know nothing of your land or its ways. This is the only home they ever have known.”

“Forty strong backs, forty pairs of hands,” M’kaal said. “This is a fair price for all you take from us in return.”

Urseth sat with his eyes downcast as the feast and merriment went on around him, weighing the decision and grunting under the burden of it. His gaze lit on the war club lying alongside M’kaal’s leg. He leaned forward and ran his blunt fingertips over the wood, then more lightly over the sharp pegged teeth embedded in its sides. He appeared to want to hold it, but knew it would be a rude and unseemly request.

Then his gaze lifted, as if he could see all the way through the night down to the boats beached in their cove. At last he looked up with a broad smile, and M’kaal knew that it was done.

“I would like to return with you, too, so I can see where my people are going, and know where they are when I miss them,” Urseth said. “And I would like to see with my own eyes these hills you have built while I can.”



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

You couldn't call it a cult *house*, not this one. Tower was more like it. True, it would get lost in the shadow of all those new spires starting to poke up way above the London skyline lately. But everything was relative, wasn't it? You could take both their limestone place in County Kilkenny and the Regent's Park house, drop them inside, and they would have ample room to rattle around like a pair of dice in a cup.

East of the city in the Docklands, it stood twelve stories of brick and steel and shiny glass, a renovated industrial building, judging by the looks of it and the area in general. From the outside, it gave the impression of being housing for the sort of upscale urbanites who loved the idea of living in a brewery, with a few added layers of exclusivity, as it didn't appear to welcome visitors at all. He found it a wonder there weren't daily hordes outside clamoring to sign a lease.

There was, at least, an inlet to a ground-level parking garage whose entrance was blocked off by a sliding gate. When Declan wheeled this trip's rental into it, out of a day of furiously pounding rain, he had to stop next to a kiosk outfitted with a recessed camera lens and microphone. No call button. He presumed somebody was watching, always watching. He could wait. They could wait all day.

After two minutes the speaker came to life: "What part of 'no vacancies' do you not understand?"

"Kemsiyet, countrywoman of your employer, wishes to inform you that she has her own residence, in a place where the air is a lot better," he said. "But she'd like very much to have an audience with him to speak of a certain house in Camden."

They had to sit through another prolonged silence which he assumed meant various minions were conferring with each other and with Setka himself.

Finally: "Let's see her."

Declan rolled forward a bit and whirred down the rear window. Behind him, she pulled off her big black sunglasses and turned to face the camera. He wouldn't have liked to be on the receiving end of the look she gave it.

A few moments later, the gate ahead of them clanged and shuddered and began to grind toward the left. He found no shortage of parking places on the other side, even though they were well outfitted with vehicles: cars, trucks, SUVs, motorcycles.

From here, a succession of grilled-over speakers mounted in the roof and ceilings directed the three of them into a hallway, an empty lobby where they passed through a metal detector, and finally toward a lift being sent down for them.

As they waited, Fiona tapped him on the wrist. "Do I actually have a role here?"

He nodded. "If I get taken out, everything's all on you."

She huffed. "I'm being serious."

Kemsiyet stepped in to field this one. "Watch. Learn. Study." She then gave Fiona a quick appraisal up and down. "You look to be no threat at all. That's important, too."

"Oh, she'll surprise you, this one," he said, and gave Fiona a wink. "She charged the Shuankhsen and clouted him with a piece of bronze. Let's give her some credit."

Kemsiyet looked at her as if doing a total reappraisal. "You did?"

"I'm afraid so."

"That was very foolish, and I would like to have seen it."

The lift arrived empty, and Declan stepped in first to give it an inspection. Not sure what he was looking for — no obvious gas nozzles or gun muzzles, so that was reassuring — but if it was going to be a deathtrap, he hoped it went quickly.

After the doors closed and they started to ascend, a look of doubt clouded Fiona's face. "Why would he help with this? He's got no incentive. He lives well here. Obviously. Why wouldn't he just want to protect what he has? He seems well dug in for that, too."

"Setka caused the problem. It's his obligation to address it." Kemsiyet spoke as if it were the most natural foregone conclusion in the world.

"Yeah, but... ." Fiona clearly didn't share her confidence in anyone dubbed *the Lingerer* taking responsibility. "If he wiped out one cult to protect himself, why wouldn't he wipe out what's left of another?"

"Because we're not going to challenge or threaten him in any way." Declan then looked at Kemsiyet as a gentle reminder. "Right, Mum?"

She flashed a scowl at him. "Mind your tone."

"Right," he said. Back to Fiona: "Forget about what he did to Banefre and his people for a minute. Why would you do what Setka is doing... why make that choice to become a pariah among your own kind, the only ones who can really know you... unless there's a part of you that's in love with life and the world and everything in

it?” He let that sink in for a moment. “It can’t be pure selfishness. That’s why I think he’ll help.”

The lift stopped on the tenth floor, where a pair of hulking guys in track suits had them step out for a secondary search, quick pat-downs for him and Fiona. Kemsiyet they left alone, visual only. They knew better. Visiting dignitary and all, best not to subject her to the indignity. Not much threat she could hide beneath that dress, anyway. The pair followed them back into the lift and accompanied them the rest of the way.

The top floor consisted almost entirely of open space, like a vast, high-ceilinged loft subdivided by function and clusters of furniture. One side wall was dominated by the biggest television he’d ever seen, with a diagonal of nine feet, currently occupied by a huddle of gamers blowing everything in sight to molecules and gore on some alien world. The sound system could’ve shamed a cinema. In one corner, a drumming circle competed for volume levels. A fully functioning bar served up coffee, pints, mixed drinks. The crowd skewed young, and some mingled in conversation while others amused themselves and still others seemed to be in another world entirely.

Declan hadn’t settled on what he’d expected here, but this definitely wasn’t it. Setka lived like a newly crowned tech industry billionaire, swimming in toys and surrounded by sycophants. If Banefre had problems with what he regarded as decadence, one sight of this place would’ve driven him mad.

When Setka came up to greet them, he was there before they knew it. They didn’t see him coming because they couldn’t. It evidently amused him to cross the room in a kind of shadow that he coalesced around himself, a thickening of the air like a cocoon. This portable darkness unraveled with curls of smoke bearing a scent like sandalwood, and he seemed to simply *appear*, with the self-satisfied look of someone who’d just pulled off a grand parlor trick.

He shooed away their hardmen escorts, and even looked the part of the nouveau tech riche, all business casual, heavy on the casual, wearing a richly blue shirt untucked over khakis and bare feet. A scarf hung around his neck for a touch of flamboyance. With smooth, golden brown skin, he looked surprisingly youthful — couldn’t have been much more than twenty when they killed him.

Kemsiyet peered at him as if she didn’t quite recognize him, then reached up to his hair, glossy black and artfully disheveled and trimmed to brush the outer edges of his cheekbones and his collar. With a flick of her fingers, she jostled the entire arrangement at once.

“Oy! Don’t do that!” Setka spun the wig back into place with a huff. “My body doesn’t remember hair, so neither does my sahu. I got to missing it. Someday I won’t. But for now, I do.” Irritated — but not angry, thank the gods — he made one last adjustment. “Look, I know we have lots and lots of time, but is this really the best use of yours?”

“You’re right. It isn’t,” she said. “Let’s talk about cults going to war with each other. Let’s talk about massacres. Let’s talk about Banefre. These would be worthy topics, do you not agree?”

He seemed loath to admit the obvious. “I’ve heard about what happened there. It sounded like it was an appalling scene. It made me glad I’ve taken all the precautions I have here.”

She stared at him for an uncomfortably long time, as if expecting him to crack. Declan was pretty sure he knew better, that she was actually tamping down her temper.

“If I did not know better,” she said, “I would believe what you’re trying to do is assure me you had nothing to do with it.”

“What makes you think you know better?”

“The video they left behind saying you went in under an agreement of truce and reconciliation, and then killed them.”

Setka looked genuinely puzzled, or feigned it well, then glanced about at the jostling people. “Not really a conversation for the middle of the floor, is it?”

He led them over to a wall of windows, to settle into a quartet of plush chairs that sat facing each other. On the other side of the glass, the spring rain spattered and blurred a southern view of the Thames where it looped down into Greenwich, and the docks and waterways in between. The farthest bend of the river was lost in the low clouds and gloom.

“Now,” he said. “Tell me how it is again that dead people make videos?”

“When you fail to kill all of them.”

“Then why aren’t they here to accuse me on their own?”

“They discovered their own way to die.”

“I find all this most confusing... starting with the matter of blame,” he said. “I may have become *aware* of this, that’s true, but am I to blame? It was nothing I asked for. I didn’t tell my people to do any such thing. Actually, it’s remarkably like one of the stories from the history of these people here. They had a king once who was being troubled by a particular priest. These two had some big differences of opinion on how certain things should be, especially involving priests. The longer it went on between them, the harder the king found it to rule as he saw fit. But all the king ever said about it was this: ‘Will no one rid me of this meddlesome priest?’ And, wouldn’t you know, the priest happened to be killed. But the king never ordered anyone to do a thing. The two of them were friends! It was dull-witted knights taking it upon themselves to butcher this man in his own cathedral. The king could hardly be blamed for thinking out loud around people who couldn’t distinguish between thoughts and commands. I believe I know how this poor king must have felt. I really have pity for him.”

Kemsiyet appeared not the least bit swayed. “What if the knights had killed many nuns and worshippers along with him? Would you have pity for them?”

Setka began to grow more agitated. His façade of innocence was dropping. *Now* they’d be getting to the truth of things.

“Let me tell you about the meddlesome priest in this scenario,” he said. “They may not have begun this way, but he taught his nuns and worshippers to be just as meddlesome as he was. He had to go to sleep sometimes. They didn’t. They carried on his crusades whether he was up and around or not. There were many people of mine who never came back from one trip or another. I have pity for *them*. And a king’s patience has limits, you know.”

He sat back in his chair a moment, thinking, then threw himself forward again and tapped his head. “There’s so much locked away in here. I have a right to find it. Yes, I know how others feel about that. Maybe yourself, as well. No offense if you do, but let them. Most wouldn’t do anything more than call me a name that means nothing to me and spit some feeble curse and go back to grubbing around for more relics. But Banefre did. *He* did more. My existence got to be as important to him as his own ever was, and trust me, you don’t want that kind of attention.”

Setka leaned forward, elbows on knees, and seemed almost to implore Kemsiyet, as though he saw something in her he could tempt. “If you’d only hang around long enough to pick up on all the wonderful things about the language, the beautiful ways they have of saying things, you would know exactly what I mean when I say Banefre had a stick up his arse. Nothing says it any better than that. He had a stick up his arse big enough to club a baby seal, and he was almost that much fun to be around.”

Declan wondered if Kemsiyet was equipped to even grasp references like that. Did she know about seal hunts? Maybe it was the right thing to say, regardless. She wouldn’t be in favor of clubbing a baby anything.

“So you’ll have to pardon me if I don’t find the world diminished by his absence,” Setka said. “What’s done is done. *C’est la vie*. Such is life. Why is it an issue with you? You have nothing to fear from me.”

“Because the people of his you failed to kill tried to bring him back and they did it wrong. He came back Shuankhsen.”

Setka looked like a man who’d just had the breath knocked out of him. “That *is* regrettable,” he whispered. “I suppose that explains why the rest of them are dead.”

“Mine as well. All but two.” Kemsiyet looked to either side of her, at him and at Fiona, and now, *now*, Declan began to see the seething anger building inside her. “He came for us while I was away. He came to take what I have been guarding for most of my existence. He came for the Blasphemous Depiction, and he got it.”

Now Setka looked as though he’d just had his face slapped in a pub. “So it does exist, then. I half believed that was only ever a myth.”

“I wish it were. He has used it once. Once is too many. That he came for it at all tells you he is prepared to commit crimes of the highest order.” Her voice went low

and feral. “*You* are the headwaters of this. *You* unleashed it. It was not your intention but it is still your accomplishment. I was away because the Sothic Wheel turned again for me, but now that time has been taken from me, along with that hideous relic, and this is your accomplishment, too. So I am here to listen to what you intend to do to stop what you have set in motion.”

It was a lot to absorb, and Setka took his time musing it over. “I’m not so sure I should do anything. Or you yourself, for that matter,” he finally said. “Have you considered this is Fate at work? That, whatever abomination Banefre has become, he’s the one fated to possess that thing now?” He laughed with incredulity. “Look what all had to happen, in just the right order, at just the right time, for that relic to end up in his hands. How do you look at that and not see the workings of Fate?”

“Oh, enough of that shite out of you, you vain coward,” Fiona said. “You want to talk about Fate? Declan here and I would probably both be dead along with the rest of our people, if not for one thing.”

Go, Fiona, Declan thought. Her surprises just kept coming.

“When Banefre sent his monsters at us, his Fasad, I’d chosen right then to pester Declan to show me something in the tomb. It wasn’t the first time. I’d been pestering him for days. But he chose right then to give in to me. Things happened for us, too, you know. At just the right time, in just the right order. For us to live. If we hadn’t, none of the rest of this would be known. That thing would be loose in the world and no one would know who had it. *She* wouldn’t even know it was gone right now. So if you see Fate in the one, you have to see Fate in the other. You don’t get to pick and choose.”

Setka looked as if he didn’t know whether to be affronted or amused. Finally he looked at Kemsiyet while pointing at Fiona. “I like her. I wish I had one like her here, myself. She might keep me more honest.”

Kemsiyet looked proud. “She’ll surprise you, that one.” Stealing from him now, was she? Well, whatever it took.

“Though it might be too late for keeping me honest already.” Setka was back to playing his games of something less than sincerity again. “Lingering takes its toll. What would be more like a Lingerer than to sit back in the comfort of his fortress and watch how things unfold?”

“Because I don’t think that’s really you.” Declan felt he’d been silent long enough. “Downstairs, I was saying how I thought you took this path because there’s a part of you that loves the world and what’s in it. As grotesque as it can be, you still see the beauty.”

Setka looked intrigued. *Do go on*. Maybe it was more games, but it could just as easily have been genuine. A being who wanted to remember who he was couldn’t do it all on his own. He’d have to listen to the opinions of others sometimes.

“I’d say it’s already in your nature, and always has been,” Declan told him. Glad he’d studied the profile on Setka that Banefre’s people had compiled, going over it

until he'd committed the key parts to memory. "The Judge you serve, or used to, is Ruruti. The judge of those who desecrate or destroy sacred places, sanctified places. Plenty of those on Earth. But what do you think a Shuankhsen cares for them? He'd just as soon see them burn. The soul's decree you made before the Judges was of the heart. *That's* your guide through life — your heart. So you have a wide range of emotions. You develop real passions for things. You go by your gut. In other words... you're more human than the rest. The guild that made you in the first place, the Mesen-Nebu, they've been called the sensualists of their age. And that must've rubbed off, too. I bet you could tell some stories about how you've indulged *that*."

Setka couldn't help but light up with a knowing smirk.

"You may think you're doing this out of your own free will, and maybe you are," Declan went on. "But could be there's as much of a recipe for making a Lingerer as there is for making an obedient slave who never questions anything, and you're it. The truth is, I'm starting to think of being a Lingerer as being the exact opposite of being a Shuankhsen. Instead of being an enemy of life, you delight in it. You see the value of it."

Setka looked utterly enthralled. In all his years, had no one ever spoken this way with him?

"So what then? You sit back and watch the Shuankhsen your own actions gave rise to just cut a swath through it? Defile as much as he can? Maybe you do. But I wouldn't have thought so."

It was all he had to say, all he could think to say. Kemsiyet gave him a gentle nod of approval, then waited to see how Setka would respond.

"This one does his homework," he told her. "Forty or fifty years from now, you're really going to miss him. Both of them. Or maybe neither of them will be any kind of memory at all. Just a nagging little itch you can't quite get at, the idea that someone once served you so well."

Setka watched her, measuring her, seeming to relish the opportunity to play the tempter again.

"You could always make one of them your Sadikh, you know. A companion in death you could always count on waking up to for eternity? Who wouldn't enjoy waking up to one of these guileless faces?"

Setka looked back and forth between them. A bit unnerving, really, considering the implications. Her name engraved upon his heart, or Fiona's, for all time. He'd have to want it, and he didn't.

"Ah, but which one? You'd have to choose. That's where the Shuankhsen have it all over us. They have enough hate to make an entire squad of Fasad. But we can spare only enough life and love for one Sadikh. That may well be the best evidence that the Judges rigged this entire system against us. So. Which one would it be?"

"I wouldn't offer it to either of them," she said. "The only ones I ever remember meeting who wanted to live for eternity were the last ones who should get to."

Setka smiled, something at peace about it, relieved, as if she'd passed some sort of test. "Well, now. Look at you. Picked up a little wisdom along the way and I bet you didn't even realize it."

He gazed out the window for a bit. The storm, at least, remained the same.

"I haven't had any good adventures for a while. I might even have a need to feel useful. All the psychology books tell me I should. But I definitely have resources that should help." Setka jumped to his feet and motioned for them to come with him. "It really is amazing what you can put together when you stay up for a few decades without having to sleep."

As they followed, Fiona shouldered in close. "For a sheepdog, you can be quite the smooth-talker sometimes."

Declan leaned in closer still. Setka and Kemsiyet may have been busy talking to one another in front of them, but Declan didn't trust him not to perfectly hear two things at once.

"He may be sincere, or he may not be," he murmured close to Fiona's ear. "But for certain he wants to watch us, to see what makes us tick. Never forget that."



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

He had chosen to travel strategically, flying out of London Heathrow only as far as St. Louis. Rawhead went First Class, not only for the extra space between himself and his fellow passengers, but also for the flight crew's willingness to please. He wanted a window seat, and they were glad to let him have it.

Over the Atlantic, hardly an hour would pass in which he didn't want to remove the Depiction from the wrapping in which he'd secured it for travel, and reveal it to the people on the plane. Start with one here, one there, and another way in the back. Add another every so often. Let its influence build a little at a time. Let the rest fear their ignorance of what was happening before their own eyes were opened to it. With luck, he could even bring down the plane.

But wants and wisdom often didn't go together. If he got everything he desired out of it, it would mean the destruction of this body he was in. Worse, the effigy would be lost to the bottom of the ocean. And worst of all? No one would ever know. It would be just another crashed plane.

He had grander plans.

On the ground again in St. Louis, he left the airport on foot and wandered until he was able to purchase a van with a minimum of bother. This he managed at a lot full of vehicles and a seller who didn't have so many scruples that, given what Rawhead offered to pay, he couldn't be persuaded to dispense with most of the bothersome paperwork.

For as much as Rawhead was paying, he also expected maps without having to go look for them himself. The man went out and took care of it, bringing back a fresh road atlas, although he grumbled about it, and that was how Rawhead knew that these creatures — who looked like him on the outside, but were nothing at all like him under the skin — were doomed for extinction. They were lazy. They wanted as much as they could get their grasping hands on for as little effort as possible. They were forgetting how to strive, forgetting how to *serve*.

West, then, in the direction of setting suns and wide open land. No one could ever find him here if he didn't want it. So much land, so few people. After a point it seemed that hardly anyone lived here, these desolate prairies like an echo of an age beyond time, when a City of Pillars stood unchallenged and alone.

He did not hurry through it. Desolation bestowed its own rewards.



For one thing, taking a meandering path gave him time to learn.

Among the possessions of the backpacker whose life he'd liberated to feed his own, Rawhead had found a portable computer. While he had no trouble searching the device for what was already stored there — not that it held any information he needed — using it to search beyond itself had stymied him at first. Still, he should know this, he thought. He knew that he knew it, but it remained a stubborn gap in his memory that took days to overcome.

He would take the computer into places along the roads that let him connect to the wider web of the world and sift among its knowledge. Gradually, the utility of it returned to him, as he put these things he knew he should know back in order again. How to seek, how to find, how to watch.

He learned how to locate all there was to find on the woman named Jessalyn Blake.

The written articles soon grew tiresome, telling him little more than he already knew from the first one he'd torn free and brought with him. Blind since she was six years old, after she was diagnosed with retinoblastoma, a cancer affecting both retinas. Started sculpting when she was eleven. Claimed her first prizes in art contests when she was sixteen. Married at twenty-five. Children, three of them, all away at school. Had always loved horses, because they so freely gave her the use of their eyes and legs. Took commissions from corporations and municipalities, museums and collectors, and sometimes she had time just to do what she wanted. Was embarrassed whenever someone called her an inspiration, and was quick to point out with a laugh that this was hardly a universal assessment. Her favorite dismissals came from critics who'd said that the work of a blind sculptor was like a dancing elephant. You didn't look at such a spectacle expecting it to actually be good, it was just the fact that it was done at all that made people think it was notable.

There were only so many times you could tell the same anecdotes.

Of greater use to him were the videos, some shot at gallery openings or new installations. How did she do it — that was something interviewers always wanted to know. She always had a ready answer. The same answer, which the person asking the question obviously couldn't be bothered to look up.

"I don't think I could if I didn't have a memory of sight. But I had those first six years, and that gave me these visual frames of reference that I would never have had

if my eyes hadn't worked from birth. Spatial relationships and everything. I'm still able to visualize images and hold them in my head. It's like my fingers and hands become an extension of these echoes of memory of having been able to see."

Echoes of memory... he appreciated that.

Among the videos, the most valuable to him were the ones shot about her everyday life, portraits of the artist in her natural habitat. These were the ones he studied, so he could piece the relevant parts together into a cohesive whole.

Jessalyn Blake wasn't the only one with a need for spatial relationships.

In a sequence of her going horseback riding with the journalist, Rawhead got a sense of the sprawling pastures and New Mexico high desert where she lived. Her neighbors were trees and hills and brush, not people.

After repeated viewings of various clips showing her in the renovated barn where she did her work, he assembled the layout, from the floor where she shaped the clay, to the area where assistants made molds, to the foundry where they poured the molten bronze.

He understood the interior of the stables where the eight horses were kept, her husband Michael devoted to something called equestrian therapy. Horses as healers? Rawhead found it a ridiculous concept. The man might be expendable, if not for the leverage he could provide.

Even the interior of the house where they lived came together, if incompletely. He at least knew the kitchen and dining room, the family room and foyer, a bedroom and a rear deck overlooking the array of buildings out back.

Put them together, memorized, and he had a remarkably detailed map that she might have been appalled to realize was out there for anyone to take, if they but knew where and how to look.

It would serve him well.



Equally important, his meandering path gave him space to hunt.

By the time he reached western Kansas he was so used to the rhythms of life out here along the highways — the sights and sounds and smells — that he could be invisible wherever he wanted. Just stay clear of the big trucks, that was the main caution he needed to follow; their drivers were too savvy, and had a focus that came from purpose. Anyone else could be considered fair game.

Rest stops were the most reliably fertile ground, especially in the long middle of the night. Anyone who traveled while everything else around them slept had either been forced into it by some misery of their lives, or they'd loved the darkness all along. He could work with either.

Out here in the lonely wastes, he found them. He had a nose for it. Sometimes they sat dozing behind the wheel of their car, unable to continue with crashing, yet wondering if it might not be better if they did. At other times they were wide awake, contemplating something they'd done or were about to do or were still looking for the courage to try.

Like this one:

He had the smell of blood about him. Nothing nearby, though. He'd carried it with him from someplace else. As he sat on the front end of his car peering back toward the highway, at the rare streaks of light that whizzed by, he had the demeanor of a hawk perched atop a pole, waiting for something smaller and weaker to stray too close.

"Did you know her?" Rawhead asked him.

The man, this human raptor, was immediately wary. "Who?"

"Did you leave her where she fell, for someone else to find? Or did you bury her, hoping no one ever would?"

The raptor didn't know who he was, and didn't want to know. He only wanted to end these questions, and the easiest way to do that was to end the one asking them. He produced a knife, and it was impressive for something bought cheap, with no soul crafted into its making.

Rawhead produced his own. He'd traded up since he'd been on this side of the ocean. As the raptor advanced on him, he used it to slice into his own scalp and slowly peel away a strip to let it dangle from his head as he recited the old rhyme.

*"Rawhead and Bloody Bones
steals naughty children from their homes,
takes them to his dirty den
and they are never seen again."*

And did this stop the raptor in his tracks? Beautifully so. Did it make him reconsider every impulse he'd just had? That, too. Did it force him to realize *he* was that smaller, weaker prey straying across something else's sky? Probably not. He didn't seem given to quite that much introspection.

As he reversed course and backed away, stumbling, Rawhead followed.

"I have a gift for you, but you have to accept it willingly," he said. "Take it, and you can indulge these hungers of yours on a scale you never dared dream of. Take it, and they all will fear you just to see you coming."

Rawhead backed the raptor against his own car, where after a helpless moment he thought of making one last feeble attempt at resisting. Rawhead easily caught the hand with the knife before it got anywhere near. He gave the wrist a twist and the

knife went clattering to the asphalt. He loomed in close to the raptor's face and held nothing back, letting himself be truly *seen* for what he was and wasn't. He conjured up all the dread and terror the raptor had it in him to feel, until just like that, quick as the snapping of a stick, the man's will broke.

"Do you want the honor of this gift I offer you?"

The raptor had trouble with his voice: "What does — how does —"

"It's like... ." Rawhead had pause to think of the right word. "Like a tattoo. Of my name. But on the inside. Over your heart."

He smoothed the strip of dangling skin back to his scalp.

"Doesn't that sound like something you would kill to have?"

When he had freely confessed his desire to accept this magnificent gift, Rawhead gripped him by the shoulder and steered him into the scrubby fields beyond the rest stop, where they would be less likely to suffer interruptions. He kicked the raptor's legs out from beneath him and followed him down, straddling his chest and gripping his new convert's head so hard his nails dug crescents into the skin. He pressed a thumb beneath each eye; could've gouged them out if he'd been in another mood.

His soul reached lower, probing for entrance, then focusing one tendril into a shard like ice. It sharpened itself on bone and began to etch.

How do you do it? a film crew might have asked if he had let one follow along to record his work.

Actually, he wasn't sure. He might compare his most venomous gaze to that of the Blasphemous Depiction, only diluted and weaker, with the power of a servant rather than a master. Did he not now serve Ammut, the Devourer? Did he not once serve Arem-Abfu, the Final Judge, whose countenance could never be beheld? If he was the servant of forces that would break the minds of those who confronted them, then it should only be expected that they would shine through him.

It triggered something in even the stoutest hearts. It stirred up every sorrow and regret, every fear and phobia, every shameful lust and unfulfilled wish. It showed them how far they'd fallen short of what they could have been. They screamed themselves hoarse at the revelation, and the raptor was no different.

It didn't take long with this one. Not two minutes in, his skin began to crack and split and ooze. The corruption in him was already so close to the surface.

When it was done, Rawhead stood him up and looked at his ravaged face trickling in the moonlight. Well done — a work of terrible art. He led his newest Fasad to the all but empty parking lot and shoved him into the back of the van with the other three waiting to welcome another.

If he'd given them permission to speak, they might have called him brother.



When the seafarers of the Ta'alun turned their boats around and set off for home again, they took Urseth and some fifty of his people back with them — forty for work, and ten to learn the building of boats. M'kaal made a place for the chieftain on his own barge, and the Servant of Tongues, as well, so they might speak along the way.

Urseth knew the legends and lore of the coast in great abundance, tales of events going back years and generations, even as far back as the time of the first men. He delighted in telling them all as they occurred to him, and M'kaal delighted in hearing them, even if most he found hard to believe. An enormous rock recalled a story of two brothers, giants both, and their contest to see who could hurl it the farthest, and how by the time they were done, half the sea was emptied because of all the splashes. A cove, not as fine as the one where Urseth and his people lived, summoned a legend of a tribe that had lived there since the dawn of time, only to vanish in a single night — devoured in their sleep, it was said, by creatures that came crawling out of the sea.

It was the only tale that made M'kaal uneasy. He had seen what could lurk in a river — the terrifying, long-snouted lizard they called the *subok*, whose teeth they used in their clubs — and out here, in the Northern Sea, there was enough water to hide monsters the size of the tallest trees.

Sure enough, as though Fate wished to tease him, or test him, it was not long before he glanced overboard and saw a creature that made even the largest *subok* seem small. It glided at an unhurried pace through the clear waters beneath his barge, undulating side-to-side like a serpent. He was the only one to notice; if anyone else had, they surely would have roused the rest. He was about to do so himself when its blunt head rolled to one side and it peered up through the water with a single eye the size of a man's skull. It looked directly at him, focused directly *on* him. M'kaal followed it as if in a trance, until it rolled its head back down as it swam past and continued on its way.

He chose not to speak of it, and didn't see it again the rest of the voyage. But they were nearly to the mouth of the Great Mother River before he stopped looking for it, and could leave thoughts of it behind in the sea where they belonged.

It was time for thoughts of home.

During his years of war and exploration, M'kaal had brought many people back with him, in numbers beyond counting or recall. While they'd all had lives of greater meaning waiting for them, never had there been one who wished to go, who made the journey sitting willingly at his side.

So he found it an event to take pride in, seeing his land and home as Urseth saw them, marveling at each new sight: the branching waterways at the river's mouth, the marshlands that stretched ahead into the far horizon and teemed with flocks of birds that blotted out the sky when they took to the wing all at once. At the sight of the dam Urseth had no words at all, and once they were beyond it, the ziggurats made him wonder aloud if they hadn't taken him to another world while he was asleep, a city where gods walked in the place of men.

"It is all our doing," M'kaal assured him. "The gods played no part in it. We only hope that if they notice it at all, they see us as worthy of their favor."

Over the coming days they settled the new arrivals in the best they could. The forty went to the quarries and the brick pits. The ten aspiring boat builders spent their days along the river, and Urseth with them. Even though Karnuth had offered him quarters suitable for a guest of his stature, he quickly missed having his own people to talk to.

The Servant of Tongues was needed everywhere at once, it seemed. While he had always enjoyed the importance of being the only one among them able to do what he did — and guarded his magic well, always with a ready reason why it could not be taught as easily as the rest thought it should be — he now began to regret it and complain.

He wasn't the only one. The quarry masters had their own grievances, as did the masters who oversaw the making of bricks. The forty newcomers made poor workers. They didn't understand everything that was expected of them, or why it should be, and without the Servant of Tongues to trade their words back and forth, the only way to *make* them understand was with the lash and the goad, same as all the rest.

And when from a distance, while being shown the world from the top of the city's tallest tower, Urseth saw his people at work, he nearly wept at the sight. He had never realized it would be so punishing.

"Their time here is only for a year," M'kaal reminded him. "You have slaves of your own back home, and they will never be free."

Yet Urseth failed to see the comparison. "They cook and make clothing. *That* is what they do. They tend the herds and gather fruit. They carry water and firewood. We do not break them."

Matters went better along the river, but not by much. Whenever the Servant of Tongues was engaged elsewhere, it could be difficult for Urseth's people to grasp the finer nuances of boat building, and so their early efforts were failures, listing in the water or sinking outright. Perhaps they were stupid people who couldn't be taught, the master builders concluded. It would be easier, and certainly more entertaining, to mock them and watch them fail. At least until M'kaal realized how the arrangement was deteriorating, then came back

with his club to smash the knee of one of the builders and see if that didn't get the rest of them to take this alliance seriously.

But even now, Karnuth warned him, it may have already been too late to expect better. Especially after one of Urseth's people at the quarry remained standing where he should not have stood while sending up a basket of stones, and the rope snapped, and his chest and shoulder were crushed when they fell on him. After that, Urseth's mood began to darken, and his heart seemed heavier by the day.

Still, they would not have guessed that Urseth would be foolish enough one night, while the world slept, to make his way to the brick pits and free the people there, his own as well as others. Armed with the long, heavy blades used for chopping straw, they went to the quarries next, and began to free the people there, as well.

By then, the warriors of the Ta'alun had begun to respond, M'kaal among them, roused furious from sleep by a runner who'd come to wake him with the news. Their war bands streamed north of the city to confront the rebels, spears and war clubs against straw-blades and stones, but the battle was still hard fought, with plenty of spilled blood and shattered limbs on both sides.

Half of Urseth's people lived, though, and alongside him fought their way clear to rejoin their brothers waiting for them at the river. They stole two of the seagoing reed boats for themselves and burned the rest at anchor. While they may have been slow learners when it came to building, they could pilot the boats well enough, and were gone before the chaos cleared.

Not the least among the night's sorrows came when M'kaal decided to use the rebellion as a chance to see how Touwam, the man from the south, would perform in true battle. He gave him a spear and set him upon the rebels... but even in this, Fate turned against them. Touwam killed only one before his resolve seemed to waver, then break as he stood over the body as hundreds of others clashed around him. With a terrible howl of anguish and wrath, his allegiances changed on the spot and he turned against his masters. He murdered two of the Ta'alun before they realized what was happening, and it took three spears to bring him down.

The returning scouts who'd brought him had been right: The people of the south *were* fierce fighters. In great numbers, they would be difficult to conquer.

In all ways, it was a long and terrible night. The sun rose on smoke and ash and blood. If the gods were watching, nothing could have been more humiliating. Nothing could have called their favor into greater doubt.

"This is what comes of making allies of lesser people," M'kaal said to Karnuth as they walked along the river and surveyed the smoldering ruin of the boats. "It was a mistake, allowing Urseth to think of himself as our equal."

Oddly, he thought of the shell necklaces the chieftain had given them in trade. If D'jaal ever dared to wear his again, he would snatch them from around his brother's neck and fling them into the river. Or crush them beneath his heel.

"There can never be any trusting them to follow," he went on. The smoke was bitter and stung his eyes. "Their vision is short. Ours is long and far, but they're too lowly to see it for themselves. We can only bind it to them so tightly they can never shake free of it."

But, as it hung between them without needing to be said, Karnuth's magic took too long to bind just one slave's will to his betters, and hadn't been powerful enough to hold. Not when things mattered most. M'kaal's heart wasn't cruel enough to remind him of that aloud.

"The power to accomplish this is out there, somewhere. I can't tell you how I know, only that I do. My heart tells me this is true, and that my fate is to be the one to bring it back."

Karnuth halted and, for a long time, pondered this as he stared into the passing waters of the Great Mother River. She had always spoken deeply to him, her swirls and eddies whispering wisdom and counsel.

"I had always hoped it would be me to do this," Karnuth whispered. "But I see now this was my own vanity. It is right that it be taken from me, that I turn it over to you."

And Fate was well honored. For the good of them all, he would have to seek this other way and find it on his own.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When someone like Declan Pierce whooped and grabbed you by the shoulders and leaned down to plant a loud kiss on the top of your head... well, that was how you knew you'd really done something right. From now on, this would be the standard to beat.

Up to that point, Fiona had been feeling fairly well useless the past few days. Priority One was Find The Shuankhsen, and they only had the entire world to comb through, didn't they? The heavy lifting had been mostly turned over to Setka's people, as it should have been — they were infinitely better equipped to do the job. But while she was relieved they were handling it, getting sidelined with all but a crisp "We'll take it from here" felt like another way of being called incompetent.

Lives at risk, though. There was no room for pride.

So how *were* you supposed to find a rogue monstrosity like this? Beyond a deep inclination to wreak havoc, they didn't know what he wanted or what he had planned. The only thing they could be sure of, Kemsiyet told them, was that he would no longer be thinking of himself as Banefre, and certainly not as Ewan Hollister... but that he might be *aware* of them, as two lesser components of whatever he regarded himself as now.

Like a transplant patient, Declan had observed. Somebody else's heart, another donor's liver, but still unique unto himself.

As far as they knew, he was back on British soil. Two waves of casualties in and around Waterford... a likely ferry ride back across the Irish Sea... a single gruesome kill near a Welsh railway, which almost certainly had to be his... and there the trail ended. To track him by his carnage was unacceptable. They would never get ahead of him.

Two of Setka's people went to Camden to sit on the Regent's Park house, in case he returned there through some sort of homing instinct, but that wasn't much of a plan, either. He wouldn't simply blunder into their hands because he didn't know where else to go.

They sent two more to Brixton, where Ewan Hollister had a flat — she'd been able to furnish that much, culled from the internal records on the recovered hard drives. He seemed even less likely to return there, but they couldn't ignore it.

The one advantage they had was that while their quarry may not have thought of himself as Ewan Hollister, he had no choice but to travel under that identity. And that was where Setka's people were able to get their fingers in and really start digging.

He'd shown them off the other day, while they were all together. Down on the eleventh floor of his building, Setka had what amounted to his own data center, with a serious amount of hardware and, when they were sober, upwards of a dozen people to use it. They apparently knew their stuff, though. Through nowhere near legal means, they were tapped into systems of law enforcement and intelligence and commerce that impressed even Declan. Whatever moves the Shuankhsen made as Ewan Hollister, they would know about them.

Which was how they got the hit that he'd flown out of Heathrow on a trans-Atlantic flight to the middle of America. It came too late to intercept him, but they could at least pull Setka's people from pointless stakeouts here on the wrong side of the ocean and send them following a few hours behind. Get them on the ground, at least, that much closer if and when he popped up again... as he did when, the day after arrival, one of Ewan Hollister's credit cards was used to purchase a pre-owned van and acquire a cash advance. There couldn't be a shortage of nondescript desert-tan vans in the U.S., but at least that narrowed it down.

"A van, you know what that means. It's a troop carrier. He's going to rebuild his squad of Lifeless thugs," Declan said at the news. "And he'll be paying cash for petrol. He'll be staying under the radar for a while."

So far, the Shuankhsen seemed to have been operating by a strategy of calculated risks and measured caution. To what end, though? There was obviously a method to it, they just couldn't see it because... .

Because we haven't got a fecking clue what he wants.

So be it. Take a step back, then. Review everything as though coming to it fresh.

To be sure, she had the time. Declan was keeping himself busy conferring with Setka's crew, as well as setting up travel logistics for whenever Banefre's trail sparked hot enough to follow. Kemsiyet had made herself even more scarce, retreating to the tomb with some crusty looking old book she'd brought back from Setka's. No idea what that was about. The woman didn't say, and Fiona wasn't going to ask.

So what is mine to do right now?

If you didn't know where someone was going, it couldn't hurt to look at where he'd been. However slim the chance, it was possible he'd left clues behind.

Cycling through the chronology, she began to realize they'd let themselves leave a gap of knowledge in this bloody sequence of events. A small one, perhaps, but a potentially significant one. Just staying focused on the obvious had been enough to keep them occupied, doing little more than getting everything sorted out:

Who had hit them here at the manor house and nearly wiped them out.

Who'd done the same to Banefre's cult, and what had happened soon after, when their attempt to call him back had gone wrong.

The trail of destruction this newly born Shuankhsen had been on after he left, where it was leading, and how the three of them here couldn't contend with it alone.

Yet they'd left a hole between two of the pivotal events: the Shuankhsen's creation, and his setting off after them in Ireland. Turning points, both of these. She and Declan had been so focused on looking at either side of them, they'd neglected to look in the middle.

If there was any clue to be found, it would be on those hard drives she'd brought back.

Fiona allowed herself a moment of self-commendation for having cloned the originals, then stashed them away. Keeping them protected and pristine, leaving them exactly as they had been when she'd taken them from the house. Whenever she and Declan had combed through Banefre's archives, they'd used the clones. Smartest thing she ever could have done.

They'd only wanted data, after all, not *metadata*. Not access dates.

She freed up some of the drive bays in her workstation and installed the originals a few at a time. Kept the encryption key handy for every time she had to unlock another one.

First, she needed to pin down a target time and date. Easy enough, that. Some time after his creation, their Shuankhsen had to have gone upstairs from the blood-bath he'd left in the basement. He would've gone into the offices, a plan already formulating in his mind, obviously, and pulled up the personnel files on them that Banefre had been accumulating for decades. Kemsiyet's people, where to find them... where to kill them.

She checked the file information, the date and time it was last opened — there, simple as that. It lined up. When she compared it to the creation date on the video shot down in the temple, she found that Banefre, now reborn, had done his data mining on them six hours later.

Once she had that, she had all the parameters she needed for a tidy, targeted search. It took longer to swap out each round of drives than to execute the search itself.

In the end, it turned up a small batch of text and graphics files, all of them stored together in a single master folder. He'd got into them within fifteen minutes of the personnel data, the only other files he'd accessed. Printouts of everything, to take on the road? Probably.

Her heart was beginning to pound.

No, do it right, she thought. Don't get sloppy now...

Fiona yanked and stowed the original drives again without opening anything, and returned to the clones to find out what had been so important.

Even then, she didn't know what she was looking at. Well, when in doubt or in the dark, call Declan.

"This is the last thing he was looking up before he came after us, but I don't know what to make of it," she said. "What are the Fountains of Ma'at?"

And that was when he kissed her.

It wasn't creepy at all.



Three times, so there could be no error, the smoke and signs of divination pointed M'kaal toward the east, and so into the east he went, where each day's fading sun fell behind him, and ahead of him the harshest mountains beckoned. His ordeal there would deliver him the answer the Ta'alun needed. Or it would kill him. He was prepared to accept either. The gods could watch, and Fate would have its way.

It wasn't a journey for a war band, but neither was it to be made alone. Only its final steps he would take by himself. To accompany him the rest of the way, there was only one man he would trust so totally as to do exactly as he asked. D'jaal had never left his side before. There was no reason for him to start now.

And so into the east they rode, laden with enough food and skins of water to last throughout the days it would take to put them beyond all sights of home. Past that, they would trust Fate to provide whatever they needed for the remainder of the way. They rode slowly now, unconcerned with haste because this was not a journey in search of captives. Rather, it was a journey in search of a vision, in which anything might speak to him. Whether it whispered or roared, he would have to be as ready to perceive it as he was for death.

"There might come a time when I ask you to stay behind and make a camp for yourself while I go the rest of the way on my own," M'kaal told his brother. "Or I might ask you to stay closer and guard my solitude so nothing and no one disturbs it. Including yourself, no matter what you might see or hear. So you must be ready for anything. And you must not question."

Ahead, the land looked harsh and dry, the green of home far behind them, and the rocky hills and mountains jutting before them like the teeth of a vast and hungry jaw. Only the sky was the same.

"I won't question you then. But I have one now." D'jaal sounded glum about it. "When will I know that too long has passed? How will I know that Fate has conspired to take my brother from me and send me home alone?"

M'kaal gave it some thought, but answers eluded him. Perhaps he was not meant to know such a thing, because to know it would mean Fate had as much as told him he would fail. In which case, they might as well turn around now. But he had to leave D'jaal with something.

“Then before I pass entirely into the Underworld, I will send my shadow to you, so you’ll know it has gone from my body and neither will be coming back,” he said. “And leave my body behind for the birds. You’ll have a long journey back home, and it will be the worst traveling companion you will ever have.”

“Then how would that be any different than before?”

And it was good to laugh now, because it felt as if they would have a long wait before either of them had another reason to laugh again.

They pressed on, and their mounts grew balky because they didn’t like it either. On good days he felt a lure, a whisper-quiet call from one direction above all others. On bad days he lost the thread, forsaken and bereft of knowing, until they stopped and made a camp where he could strike a flint and start a fire. As he burned the plants from the temples of home, and animals howled and quarreled in the darkness, he would breathe the smoke and watch the way it wafted. Whenever it defied the wind, he knew *this* was the true direction. The smoke wasn’t being pushed from behind, but rather drawn by whatever lay ahead.

Onward. Closer. Closer still. M'kaal’s gaze constantly roved back and forth. He watched for paths leading up, for the openings of caves, for the signs of burrows that would prove larger than they looked, a passage to some chamber beneath the ground.

At last they came across it — beyond a field of boulders and broken slabs, a hardscabble path up to some mountain aerie — and he knew. Everything within the five-fold layers of his soul told him so. Here he would die, or a new era for his people would be born.

“Make your camp,” he said to D'jaal with quiet resolve. “And remember everything I’ve told you.”

He gathered as much food and water as he thought he could carry without it holding him down — too much would show a lack of faith, as well — then embraced his brother before embarking on this rough path toward the sky.

“If all you see of me again is my shadow, do not give up on this search,” he said. “All it means is that I was never worthy of finding the answer myself. The failure will be mine alone. The search falls to you then, so keep pushing Karnuth to continue going where only he can. There is a kindness in him that holds him back sometimes, I think. Kindness makes for a poor material in the building of an empire.”

It took him half a day's climb before he was able to forget the sorrow and fear on his brother's face.

Little by little, the ground fell away below him, as he followed a path that even goats might not have dared to climb. But his grip never failed him and his feet were always sure. Carrion birds circled in for a closer look, then veered away, seeing there was nothing for them here, and he jeered at their defeat.

Onward. Higher. Higher still.

By the waning light of evening, the western sky soaked in the colors of a hard-won battle, he arrived at what seemed to be waiting just for him, with no apparent way of going any further: a small plateau set amid rounded hummocks of weathered rock and flanked by a pair of gnarled little trees. There was room for his bedroll and pack, with room to pace left over. He hung his pair of water skins dangling from a branch.

Then he settled in to wait, with only the soft keening of the wind across the rocks for company.

It didn't take long to lose track of the days. Still, he knew how to fill them. He chanted the songs of home, whose wings had been carrying travelers between worlds since before living memory. He shook his rattle, a dry gourd filled with pebbles and the crumbled spines of snakes. Its sound slithered among the rocks, and he knew if he wasn't careful to keep his wits, he might follow it right over the side. He marinated in the smoke of herbs until there were no more left to burn.

Each morning, as soon as he awoke, he took his blade and scraped the whiskers from his face, because if it was a god that was coming to counsel him, he still wanted to kneel before it clean and respectful in countenance, without hiding behind a beard. A god could only look kindly on the effort, for his was a countenance that any god might find fair to look upon.

Then came the morning he awoke to find that the branch from which he hung his water skins was gone, somehow snapped off at the trunk during the night. The skins were nowhere to be found, nor the branch either. They could only have gone over the side, even if he couldn't imagine how it had happened.

Another two mornings later, he decided with regret that it would be wise to leave his face unshaven, because the hunger and thirst were getting bad enough that his hands were no longer sure of what they were doing, and left him cut and bleeding. Likewise, the rattle fell silent after his fingers could not be trusted around the handle.

It became easier to merely sit.

Then easier not to leave the bedroll at all.

His only company was still the soft keening of the wind, and the carrion birds that had come back for another look.

And how such a thing could have happened, he would never know, but the Great Mother River must have overflowed her banks to sweep across the world. Her waters had risen so high they spilled over the rock walls to lift him up and carry him away to some secret cataract that emptied into the Underworld. Until he realized, no, these could never be the waters of home, because they were cold, so cold, and so was he. They must have come from the north, then, another flood sent to carve away at the face of the world...

... and the next thing he knew, strange hands were on his chest. No, *in* his chest, fingers like a burning branch thrust against his heart, *around* it, and he gasped. M'kaal would have screamed if he had the breath for it, and if his throat were not as dry as a hide scraped and stretched to cure in the sun.

Visitor, savior, deliverer, life-taker... whatever this entity was to him, it tugged its hands free of the cage of his chest, then dribbled water into his mouth from a skin that looked familiar. M'kaal sputtered and choked, then took more until he could keep it down, and his visitor felt satisfied that she could sit back to watch and study.

She — yes. This was a woman, he saw that now. Or a demon of the high deserts in the guise of one. Or a goddess. But if a goddess, she was not one given to cloaking herself in finery. She was scarcely dressed at all, wrappings and rags tied about her, and her black hair falling forward so that her features were all but obscured, nothing visible but a single eye and the incredible width of a carnivorous smile. If he were to reach out and dare to touch her, he wasn't certain she would even be there at all.

He was certain of one thing, though: When he asked if he was dead, the question never passed his lips.

Dead... ? she answered. *How could anything that felt so much pain be dead?*

M'kaal tipped his head forward so he could peek at his chest, expecting to find it bloody and torn, ragged holes where she'd forced her spindly hands into him. Instead he found the skin unbroken, only bruised. This could not be. None of this could be. Unless he was in the presence of a goddess.

But if he was, then where was the glory? Where was the radiance?

"What day? How many?"

Nine, by your reckoning. By mine, only moments have passed since M'kaal of the Ta'alun climbed over his first stone to get here.

"Your name — what is it? Do you have one?"

Of course I have a name. I gave it to myself. And I shall keep it to myself. To name something is to control it, and to control it means to send it forth to do your bidding. Isn't this the most sacred law that you and your people live by?

He couldn't remember. But it sounded true.

Not that you could control me even if you knew a thousand of my names, she went on. But better for you that you don't start thinking you could. Arrogance and will have brought you a long distance. Today is a day for you to learn humility. Just enough to prove your merit.

“What should I call you, then, if not by your name?”

She appeared to think it over, then blessed him, or cursed him, with a bright and happy smile that by some unfathomable means stretched beyond the limits of her face to fill the sky.

Hunger, she said. That should be a suitable name. I have appetites, but I never seem able to get my fill of what sates them.

M'kaal struggled to sit up, now that his strength was beginning to return. She had revived him with more than water, he felt certain of that, too. Was the taste not both sweet and bitter, now that he thought of it?

As he focused his gaze on her, his eyes feeling moist and clear again, he tried to make sense of her presence, her essence, her everything. There were moments when she seemed to slip from his sight, something else behind her that he could only catch in glimpses. He saw a flash of what looked like a *sub-ok*, those fearsome lizards that might hide in the waters of the river and snatch unsuspecting prey from its banks. In that flash of recognition, its many-toothed jaws snapped closed hard enough to shatter the world. Another time he saw what he took for a great coiled serpent, its jaws distended and unhinged wide enough to engulf some squirming prey.

“Hunger is what drove me here,” he said. “But you know this already.”

Of course. For what other reason would I have noticed you? Why else would I have taken a liking to you? How else could I have heard the petitions of your heart?

He thought back to his voyage on the Northern Sea, and that feeling of being watched from the shore. He remembered the huge fish, eel, serpent, whatever it was, that had glided beneath his boat, and the clarity of its eye. She had been watching for some time now, had she not? The feeling had never entirely gone away.

“If you hear them... then will you grant them?”

Will I? That remains to be decided. I can, this is true. And I could be persuaded, that much I can promise you. The better question, then, is will you persuade me?

“How could I even begin to do that?”

I told you, I always am hungry, she reminded him, with the smile to prove it. So... feed me. It need not be much. Just a morsel, as long as it is dear

enough to you to make the flavor more savory. And dismiss nothing. You may be surprised at what I can eat.

He looked around the plateau in mounting desperation. His own food had been gone for days. It would be dear enough to him, if only he had a morsel left. Everything else was just possessions.

What do I see, what do we have? She knew his thoughts as she followed his gaze. A dirty bedroll. A small pack with a few worthless trinkets. A rattle... better, but still not enough. It would be easily replaced and this one soon forgotten. No taste at all.

“Then what else do I have to give you?” He’d found the strength to shout. “I brought nothing else!”

I see. She sounded regretful, or perhaps it was a monster’s mimicry of what she thought regret should sound like. Then perhaps we shall meet again some distant day, and by then you will have thought of something.

Then she scuttled over the side, and he called to her, lurched after her and landed heavily against the wall of rounded rocks, only she was nowhere to be seen. He smashed the rattle against them anyway, crushing the shell in a shower of pebbles and bones, then with a shout of despair flinging the handle at the farthest hills.

Every day and drop of sweat he’d spent in getting here had only promised him one thing: that he would either find his answers or die in the search. Petty refusal and defeat had never seemed like a possibility.

Although death remained one. He still needed to climb down.

Yet he made it, as if Fate was still behind him in ways he could never wholly understand. For even now, his grip never failed him and his feet were always sure.

Once he was down off the mountainside and safe again at the base of the hills, he stumbled toward the camp where D’jaal slept fitfully beside the smoking embers of a fire. At the sound of his footsteps, his brother awoke with the same look of fear and sorrow on his face as when he’d first watched M’kaal leave, then he broke into a smile that went beyond relief. It was the face of love.

“I never turned loose of hope!” D’jaal cried with a whoop of laughter. “You’re too filthy to be my brother’s shadow!”

M’kaal stumbled into his arms, as D’jaal bade him to come, come, sit by the fire and he would stir it to life again. For the moment, though, M’kaal was content to stand and embrace him, and remember the years, the places they had been and the things they had seen, the deeds they had accomplished. No one could have asked for a finer brother at his side.

He didn't know when the idea came to him, the understanding of what he had to do, only that it had. There was no other choice. He held nothing else so dear.

You've looked away for the last time, he had told D'jaal many seasons ago, in a bloodstained place not terribly far from here. *I don't want to see you look away ever again.*

And time was one, then and now. He might as well have been giving that command to himself, on matters of one's duty to his people's greater good. Doing it no matter how much he might despise it, or himself, forevermore.

He pulled the blade from the pack over his shoulder and found that, as dry as he was, he could still shed tears.

Did D'jaal see it coming, this blade thrust beneath his breastbone, up into his gladdened heart? No. He did not. And there was mercy in this. Mercy wearing a different mask, but mercy nonetheless. His eyes, his precious eyes, remained uncomprehending to the end. M'kaal held him close and followed him to the dirt, and told him that he was dear to him above all things, and that perhaps he would understand once he awoke in the underworld.

It was done. With the wind as his witness and their horses, hobbled and nervous, for company, it was done.

He sat on the rocks and stared at the path back up the mountain, too empty to hate it now. It simply *was*.

In time, when he could, he left his brother's side to look for a rope long enough to fit them both.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The horses were the first to know, she realized later.

They often were, when something was wrong. You couldn't have ridden for as many years as Jessalyn had — not here, not in New Mexico — without crossing paths with a rattlesnake a few times. Naturally, her horse would always notice before she did. Nothing surprising there, not when she would never see it at all. The interesting thing was, her horse nearly always seemed to notice before any riding companion did, as well. She would feel that first sudden ripple of tension beneath her, before the skittish, balky behavior, and *know* that trouble was just ahead.

The horses looked out for her, she liked to think. Extra vigilant, they were her early warning system.

And they weren't letting up tonight. You could hear them in a panic all the way up to the house.

"I better go out and check," Michael said. "Something's gotten in with them again."

It happened. Twice a fox, once a particularly frantic bat that had spooked them. As Michael went out to see to it, she finished clearing the dinner table on her own. The music from the stereo was low and steady, droning washes of sound, the receiver tuned to a community radio station in Taos during an electronic hour. She'd always needed these kinds of ambiances... music you could step into, turn around in, drift inside, like worlds made of sound.

Jessalyn had the dishes in the sink by the time things began to quiet down out in the stables. Problem solved, apparently.

Another thing about this music that clicked with her: It wasn't in any hurry to get anywhere. As though it were measured out in brainwaves rather than beats. Low and slow and...

And could that be right? Something outside didn't *sound* right. It was subtle, because everything was subtle after a point, but it sounded as if Michael wasn't coming

back by himself. She was almost sure she heard more footsteps than his alone. Then certain she caught a snatch of a voice that wasn't his.

The more heartbeats that went by, steadily picking up in pace, the less subtle *everything* got. Intuition was an entirely familiar sense, but it came from inside. This was something like a feeling in the bones and gut being forced on her from outside.

She already knew everything there was to know about darkness, or thought she did. It was all she'd lived with for nearly her entire life, with only the memory of light, so she would always know what she was missing. But this was a new dimension to it, a cold and fetid blackness that oozed in between the cracks of night. Scrape away the darkness at its worst and lowest level, and this would be what lurked beneath it.

They came in through the sliding glass doors off the patio, Michael in the midst of them, and dear god there was an entire herd of them, yes, *herd*, because for no reason she could explain, the word *group* didn't feel right. *Group* seemed to apply to people most of all, and whatever had come in —

“Jess?” said Michael, in the most stricken voice she'd ever heard.

“The horses,” she blurted. It was the only concrete thing she could think of.

“You still have seven more,” said an unfamiliar voice. “You can't expect me to deny my pets a chance to play.”

She tried to dart forward, toward Michael, but was caught from behind by hands that clamped onto her upper arms. She snatched the right one free and raised her elbow to head level, jabbing it back and twisting into it the way she'd been taught and never needed to. Until now. She connected hard, bone on bone, in the face or close enough, but whoever she'd hit didn't even flinch, much less cry out. There was just a burst of odor, putrid, like something released by removing a bandage over a festering wound.

The hands clenched her again, by the elbows now, shoving them together so that her leverage was gone.

Michael again: “*They're not human.*”

She believed him. Maybe she wouldn't have if she hadn't first felt them, their presence and the soul's miasma they brought with them.

If she'd seen them she might have doubted, but one's eyes could be fooled by something the heart could see through. The heart *knew* things. There had been moments in her life, rare but unforgettable, when her heart had assured her that she was standing near someone either more or less than human.

“What are you?” she whispered toward the voice.

“I'm a new breed of something very old,” he said, seeming very much to want her to understand. “And I bring you a choice.”

She couldn't quite place the voice. She heard elements of an English accent in it, but something else, as well, that came and went, rose and fell.

“You can either do something for me, exactly as I tell you,” he said. “Or you can listen to the sounds your husband makes as we tear his ribs out one by one.”

When he asked if he had her attention, it was a trick question, because anyone would think of course he did, except that *she* couldn't think. Couldn't process this. All she had was a recurring echo that this couldn't be happening, they couldn't be real.

Even so, whoever he was, whatever he was, he seemed reassured by something he saw, and had her forced down to sit in one of the dining room chairs.

“Take him into the next room,” the voice commanded its other followers. She heard a furious scuffle as Michael resisted. His threats and anguished protests faded out the door and down a short hall into the family room that had seen very little family in recent years. For that, and that alone, she could be grateful right now.

The voice came closer. He sounded as though he might have been fumbling with something, unwrapping an object from cloth.

“I know you can't see. But there are different ways of seeing. Do you understand what I mean?”

“I think so.” Jessalyn tried to keep control over her voice. He had to know she was terrified. No reason to so blatantly sound like it. “I hope so.”

“Good. Do you *see* this?”

She waited for more, but got no further prompts from him. Okay, on second consideration, she had no idea what he meant. She'd thought he might have been referring to other senses, compensation. But there was no sound, no smell, nothing to touch. There was no context for picking up on *anything*. It seemed a cruel joke.

“No. I don't.”

“Good.” He stepped closer still, directly in front of her.

Now she could tell, by that peculiar radar everyone seemed to possess, that he was holding something inches from the bridge of her nose. It could have been the end of a gun, for all she knew.

“Now do you see this?”

“I don't see a goddamn thing and you know it.”

“Good. Then that may mean it doesn't see you.”

Before she could puzzle over what that might mean, he ordered her to hold out one hand, palm up. As she did, with hesitation, he roughly grabbed her wrist to hold it steady, then slapped something into her palm and pressed it into place so she couldn't drop it. It felt cool and heavy, a chunk of metal the size of a potato.

Did she see?

He'd obviously been after something deeper, and now she began to understand what. She had friends, maybe more sensitive than most, who when in trusted company had spoken of antiques and heirlooms with bad energy around them. Finally,

she had a sense of that. This was dangerous. It was like he'd put a rattlesnake in her hand.

"Count backwards from ten," he told her.

She did it, and again he seemed satisfied as he withdrew the object from her palm. Whatever these incomprehensible tests were, it felt as if they were finished.

"I don't understand."

"You will make me replicas of this. In bronze. Exact, in every way except size. They must be bigger. As big as you can make them, as many as you can make."

When she began to protest, that she'd never done anything like this, that she didn't think she could scale something this small up so far, and why did it have to be her, he wouldn't hear of it. Of all the disturbing things he could've done then, quoting her verbatim back to herself had to be near the top of the list.

"*I'm still able to visualize images and hold them in my head.*" Your own words, little worm. *'It's like my fingers and hands become an extension of these echoes of memory of having been able to see.'*" He glared at her with a loathing she could feel coating her skin. "So do that."

He'd already told her this was a choice. So she chose life. That had to help, right? Life felt so totally the opposite of everything about them.



When at last M'kaal scaled the treacherous mountain path to the tiny plateau at the top, his brother's body lashed to him like a pack, she was waiting for him. As he'd suspected she would be. This goddess who called herself Hunger. Tall and thin, her features half-hidden behind her tangled black thicket of hair, with a smile that could swallow the sky, she looked more famished than before. Her ribs were protruding now, her sides palpitating in anticipation of this morsel she'd demanded.

With shaking hands, he undid the knots that bound him to his brother. He laid D'jaal's body at her bony feet, then fell back gasping for breath. He was spent, utterly spent. Every muscle ached and cramped and shuddered from the strain.

Hunger lowered to her haunches, to make a show of circling his brother's body, sniffing it with care, as if he might have been trying to fool her with something too easily given up. She tasted his head. She lapped at his wound. She nibbled at his feet, as if to know where they'd taken him; his fingers too, to know everything he'd held.

She scooped D'jaal into her arms then, to sit him upright as she lowered her face to the crown of his skull. Whether it was the clarity of exhaustion working for him, or the strength of his vision, M'kaal once again saw spectral

glimpses of the things behind her: serpent and lizard and fantastical creatures he'd never known to be real, but perhaps they were, because look at the terrible efficacy of their mouths.

Her jaw unhinged and stretched, her yawning gullet revealing a darkness within, like a hole in the world, a passage to an empty void that might never be filled. She wriggled above D'jaal for a better angle, to plunge over him, around him. Soon he was gone to his shoulders, then as far as the wound to his heart.

M'kaal turned away to avert his eyes, then covered his ears until it was done, when the goddess eased back to caress the tiny bulge this had made in her belly. She smacked her lips and licked them, savoring the last of a lingering flavor.

Not dear enough, she said. I had hoped for better.

And was that himself screaming, that terrible sound? He was afraid that it was. It was the sound of madness, a howling that echoed back from the light-swallowing void she'd revealed when she opened her jaws to feed. Not dear enough — how could she render such a judgment? She was as mad as the rest of the world, and everyone in it who thought the gods bestowed favor.

You ask a great deal from me. You ask for tremendous power. You ask for a way to wield your will over thousands. Men often sacrifice their brothers for much less. For a woman. For scraps of food. For a few trinkets that will only end up back in the dirt someday. Did you think you could buy such power for the same price that other men pay for a moment and its pleasure?

And was that him laughing, that hopeless sound? Of course it was. Because madness had more than one voice.

“He was all I had to give. Unless you want the horses, too. But you'll have to come down for those. And they will kick going in.”

All you had? Are you certain? she asked, teasing now. *I took your mind to be keener than that. Maybe I was wrong.*

“Then what do you want?” he shouted. “Tell me your price and I will find a way to pay it! But enough of your riddles. Please. Enough. Enough.”

The one eye visible through the veil of her hair lingered on him without blinking. Then, with a smile both tender and terrible, she paced across the plateau and squatted beside him.

Did I not tell you that you had come all this way to learn humility? She traced a finger through his hair. Without warning, she plucked a strand and swirled it into a wad and fed it to herself. *I believe you may be ready to hear what it is I want.*

He waited. He waited while she seemed to savor the very moment itself, eating his tension, his impatience to have her demand out in the open at last.

You're a proud one in so many ways. Your vanity is almost as great as your ambition, she said. So the price I demand of you is your visage. I want your face.

He had screamed earlier, then he had laughed, and now he discovered he could do both at the same time.

It is a price you can afford to pay. But do not dwell on the cost, only what it buys, and what lies beyond it.

She probed her fingers along his brow.

You will survive. You will return home. Where they will listen to you because your very appearance, if they can even stand the sight of you, will be all the testimony they could ever need that you have met a greater power than any of them have, and lived to tell them so. They will trust your promises and go along with what you ask. Because you alone have been willing to pay a price the rest of them could never imagine even in their nightmares.

Then she probed past his cheekbones to his jaw.

And on the other side of this, there lies the fulfillment of the dream that has driven you here. There will soon come a day when you stand before an army ten thousand strong, who will never question you, who will go anywhere you tell them, who will carry out every command you give them, and who will never feel fear or pain.

M'kaal strained against her hands, but she held him down as if his struggles were no more than a child's.

As for you, I hear the question you're too proud to ask. Yes, it will hurt. How much, I cannot say. I will give you some time to prepare. How much it hurts will depend on how attached you still are to your face by the time we begin.

He spun the options through his mind. To go through life victorious, and seize the world for his own... or to return in defeat, having slain his brother for nothing and stopping just before the threshold of victory. Then he felt a spark of hope. Perhaps she didn't even mean it. This was a test, that was all. A test of his resolve, to see if he could still be broken. Her way of toying with him before delivering to him the means to take the world.

"I accept," he said.

Above him, her smile was like a crescent moon that filled the daytime sky.

Then she descended, and that terrible smile constricted back over a new set of teeth, pointed and sharp and steaming. She began to gnaw at his face as she might a piece of fruit, scraping through the skin from ear to ear, from brow to cheekbones to chin. It peeled away in strips, and the burning followed behind

it, a hiss as though each gouging tooth had been heated in a forge. He knew well the smell of burning flesh, the stink of boiling blood.

He screamed without ceasing, but she seemed to expect that. He thrashed until he was exhausted, but it failed to hinder her. She held him pinned as securely as if he were staked down at every limb.

She was thorough, and did not rush, making sure to get it all.

And when the sky was back to blue instead of red, when his eyes could see again, when his ears could hear, and what she'd left behind no longer burned as if tossed onto a fire, Hunger told him exactly what she expected next.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Watching Kemsiyet wade through earth up to her knees may not have been as unnerving as watching her speak to the dead. But it came with baggage of its own, a flashback to the night when all this had begun, Fiona trapped in the limestone tomb as a carnivorous nightmare made his way through the wall.

“I hadn’t expected to see anything like that again quite so soon,” she told Declan. “Actually, never would have been fine. Silly me, I’d like to keep my trust in stone walls intact.”

“It’s not the spell,” Declan said. “It’s how they use it.”

For two weeks now, the woman had kept her nose buried in that musty old book of Setka’s, and this was what she had to show for it. She was treating the backyard as an obstacle course for light practice, a very different back lawn from the one in County Kilkenny, bordered by formations of lichen-crusting sandstone and Ponderosa pines. The grass wasn’t nearly as green, but on the plus side, the wide open Colorado sky looked a lot bluer and the mountains put Ireland’s in their place.

Kemsiyet was too far away for them to hear her utterances, so she and Declan could only sit back in wicker chairs watching her quietly do the miraculous and subvert the known laws of physics. One aspect of being privy to this was a revelation, at least.

“You wouldn’t think of them as having to *practice*, you know?” she said. “Or not me, anyway. I would’ve guessed it would be more like *The Matrix*. Just plug a quick download into your head and there it is.”

Declan grunted. “That’s what I always kept hoping for. Wouldn’t have had to get up so early for training then.”

“But why? Why is it so important to her to learn this? Obsessive, is what it is.”

“Ask her, why don’t you?” When she demurred, Declan threw in his own two pence. “If it were me? Petty, vindictive me? I’d want to take the same spell my

factory fresh enemy had used to break in and steal from me, and turn it right back on him, whenever I got my chance to make him pay.”

Which didn't look to be anytime soon, the way things were going. Waiting — that was all they were doing. Waiting for Banefre to resurface, show himself, or, God forbid, create some new atrocity exhibition. Instead, he was doing none of it, and not one of them could fathom why.

“Declan? Are we wrong?” she asked. “Was *I* wrong? The last thing I want to be responsible for is bringing us all over here thinking we've got half an idea of what he's up to, and be totally wrong about it.”

“If you're wrong, you still had a better idea than me or anyone else.” Easy for Declan to say. He had plausible deniability here. “But I don't think you're wrong. I think we're on the right track, it's just he's got his own reasons and timeline for what he's doing, and we'll get our heads around it eventually.”

“With luck,” she said.

“With luck, right. A little of that wouldn't hurt.”

Whatever it was Banefre was up to, the best guess they had was that it involved what the Arisen had, long ago, named the Fountains of Ma'at. Which were... well, who quite knew? They were locus points of power, of Sekhem, scattered around the world. There appeared to be some correlation with points and pathways that other traditions called ley lines, vortexes, axiatonal lines, and so on, but only to a degree. It wasn't a simple overlay, the same things going by a different name... merely an overlap. The Fountains of Ma'at were very much their own thing, but even the mummies hadn't got it all sorted out yet.

They were trying, though. And Banefre, as part of his seeming age-old effort to gather as much useful information as he could, to wield against his fellow Arisen, had found them of great interest. He and his people had rounded up data on various sites, and had plotted a global map. The most powerful of all the known sites was in Rio de Janeiro, which had become a Deathless mecca because of it. Another one, approaching the same magnitude, was in Bhutan, with others in Mongolia, India, Australia, and so on. A host of lesser spots was scattered around the continents, the red dots of his maps looking like a minor measles outbreak.

Knowing that Banefre had gone to America, those were the sites they'd focused on. That he'd flown into the middle of the country implied that his interest lay in the west or Midwest; otherwise, why wouldn't he have gone to one of the coasts, instead?

It was the only actionable intelligence they had, and to his credit, Setka got on it immediately, dispatching teams of two to as many of these sites as he could, as quickly as they could get there. Boots on the ground, and eyes to keep watch, in hopes of spotting their fugitive at one of them. Some of the teams rotated between two or more of the locations with little potential for casualties, spending a couple of days at one, then moving to the next.

The sites were located in a wide area across Montana, Minnesota, Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, Nebraska, Washington. Many were genuinely remote, far from any kind of civilization. That was the thing about America: there were *huge* areas where nobody lived. At the other extreme, one site was located in the heart of Seattle. The rest were in or near smaller towns, as if people may have been drawn to settle there by a lure they'd felt on some level, even if they didn't know what it was. They just knew the place called to them.

With the teams of spotters in place, Kemsiyet and Setka and their closer retainers had followed soon after on a private flight. At Declan's suggestion, they opted to station themselves roughly at the center of everything. Hence Colorado, where they were able to rent a large, isolated house — closer to a lodge, really — and run things from there. They'd be that much closer to Banefre whenever he resurfaced, whether by some new spectacle or something as mundane as credit card usage that Setka's people would catch back in London. And when he did, they could scramble there either by car or plane or a chartered helicopter kept on standby.

They'd covered it all as well as they could.

And so here they were. Fiona found the grounds and scenery beautiful, majestic. But waiting for the trigger to go into action eroded just about every bit of enjoyment she could have taken in them.

Awhile later, Kemsiyet concluded her practice and returned to them. "Would you leave us, Declan," she said, and he did, and she took his chair. This woman who could interrogate the dead and was learning how to wade through earth and rock. Sure, no pressure at all.

"There is something I want you to do for me after we are back home again," Kemsiyet told her. "I want you to have something made to go in the tomb. It will be a letter, from me to myself. It will have to last a long time. So paper would not be a good choice. Metal would be better, but metal can corrode and rust. So stone might be best of all. Engraved stone."

Fiona got ready to jot notes. "How long do you mean, when you say a long time?"

"It should endure the next 1461 years."

Fiona's breath caught in her chest. Imagine, thinking in those time scales. No, it was beyond imagining. She herself would be dead then, along with every memory and trace. Everyone she'd ever loved or known or ever would, dead. Whatever children she might have borne, dead. Every place she'd ever lived, dust. The houses and streets would have vanished, torn away and replaced dozens of times over.

"You may write it," Kemsiyet said. "I would *like* you to. So long as it is a reminder from me telling myself that when the Sothic Wheel turns for me again, the way I wish to pass that time is seeking out the Fountains of Ma'at. There is much about them that isn't understood yet, and I would like to know more. But I

cannot trust myself to remember this on my own. I may not remember it in my next Descent.”

Or maybe no one would be alive after the next 1461 years. Maybe humanity would have gone extinct by then, the planet uninhabitable.

“But if a reminder is in my tomb, then there will come a day when it has meaning for me again, and I will know what to do, and why.”

Yet Kemsiyet would still be there, combing through the ruins and the rubble for the last fragments of an age hardly anyone remembered even today.

“As soon as we get home,” Fiona promised. “And not a day later.”



For M’kaal, the journey back to the city of the Ta’alun was long and lonely. The horses were never entirely at ease, as if even they sensed that he was changed.

The second day, a small band of nomads approached from the north. Before he could see their faces he already knew their hearts. From a distance they would have regarded him only as a solitary traveler, vulnerable, someone they could rob, or worse. Until they drew near enough to see what had become of him, and the sight made them flee shrieking back into the north again, as though he could only be some demon wandering the wastelands.

The third day he came across a stream with heavy sedge and rushes growing thick along its banks. Even though it was early, with hours of sunlight left, he decided he would make his camp here for the night. It would do the horses good, and the water was soothing to him as well, cooling upon his skin and head and the ghastly remains of his face.

Perhaps by the time he was home again, at the Great Mother River, he would have the strength to endure the sight of his reflection on the surface of the water. But he was not there yet, and couldn’t bring himself to look. The feel of it was bad enough, the remaining meat stretched over the bones of his skull gnarled and runneled and knotted, hardened with scabs and seared by cauterizing heat.

It saddened him to think that, in spite of all he had gained for their behalf, the people of home might upon his arrival react no differently than the nomads.

With time left in the day and no good way to spend it, M’kaal watched the gentle waving of the sedge and rushes until they gave him an idea. He began to harvest them with the same knife he’d used to rob D’jaal of his return. While the stalks and blades were still supple, he twisted the longest ones together to make a sturdy framework. He wove the rest over and around it, layer upon layer, shaping it as he went, until he had a suitable mask to wear the rest of the

way. He set it aside to dry in the sun, then sliced away hairs from one of the horse's tails to braid into a cord that would hold the mask in place.

It was good he had the future to think of, the promise of what was to come. No man should have to suffer such torments alone, and he would not.

The whole of the world was out there waiting to share his pain.

Here is what I expect of you now, what you must bring me, Hunger had told him before leaving him alone at the top of the mountain. You have paid the price to work a powerful magic, but it cannot be worked out of nothing. You must feed it the raw material it needs. You must feed it through me.

And he marveled at how clearly Karnuth had understood the methods of such a monumental undertaking, even if he didn't know the means.

"To create an army of the kind you foresee... hundreds or thousands strong, all at once... the rites of binding would have to be performed as part of some other great working," Karnuth had warned him. "They would need to be backed by a source of power so tremendous I cannot even imagine how we would summon it, or control it if we did."

"But I, M'kaal of the Ta'alun, have summoned it. I, M'kaal alone, have mastered its control," he would soon tell Karnuth. "Behold, how she has inscribed on the clay of my mind, so that I might never forget it, a chant of her own making. Behold, how she has taught me alone this spell. Behold, how she has given me a rite of binding of the strength that eluded you before. Behold, how the world will bow before us."

As he sat by the burbling stream, he heard in it the roar of rivers.

For every warrior whose will you wish to be bound to your own, Hunger had told him, you must deliver to me an innocent. For each warrior you wish to send out into the world to conquer in your name, you must prepare two. I will eat the life and name of the one, and use its power to bind the other.

As he sat by the trickling stream, he heard in it the surging of seas.

Bring them ten at a time, a hundred at a time, a thousand, or ten thousand all at once, it will make no difference to me. I will devour as many as you offer, she had told him. But in beginning, let us begin with the binding of just one, to seal this covenant between us. Go to any place you deem sacred, and by the chant I have taught you, I will find you there.

As he sat by the tranquil stream, he threaded the horsehair cord through holes in the sides of his new mask.

Bring along your slave, and bring me my meat, Hunger had said. Offer it to me by name, and surrender its True Name over to me.

He fitted the mask over his head.

And for this first time, be sure that the meat is dear to you. Already I have gotten used to how savory that can be.

M'kaal gazed at his reflection in the waters, wavering but constant. Already, the price had begun to seem just and fair. It had only been a face, after all. Faces always withered, then moldered in the ground.

It was the mask that the world would see from now on.

But it was his deeds that would make him who he was meant to be. It was his deeds that would make his name immortal.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Careful what you wish for, the old saying cautioned, for all the obvious reasons.

For years, Jessalyn wanted to do more large-scale work in bronze, and now that opportunity had arrived, come under the cover of night. It had killed one of her horses for fun, broken into her home, held her and Michael captive, terrorized its way to acquiescence. It had dismantled every core belief she'd had about what was allowed in the world and what wasn't.

Doing the work, the process, would have to be its own refuge from the horror.

The seed of working at as large a scale as she could handle had been planted when she was a girl and had learned of Leonardo da Vinci and the Sforza Horse. It appealed in no small part because, even for one of world's great geniuses, the project pushed against the boundaries of what was possible. Challenging the impossible had always been important to her.

Leonardo's horse was to have been the largest equestrian statue in the world, a twenty-four-foot colossus commissioned by the Duke of Milan. Da Vinci had only gotten as far along as sketches and plans and preparations and a clay model before war got in the way, the model destroyed, the reserved bronze used for cannons and the Sforza family's fortunes in rapid decline.

And yet the thing got built eventually, five centuries behind schedule. She'd touched it, there where it stood in Milan's Hippodrome de San Siro, on a pedestal of white marble. Touched as much as she could reach, not much more than a hoof and fetlock. But even then, in the cool of its shade, she'd felt the immensity of it looming above her, and thought maybe, someday... .

It felt like an especially terrible perversion of fate now. She couldn't escape the sense that instead of something grandiose, she was making something monstrous.

The first step was simply using her fingers to develop a mental composite of this fist-size relic she was supposed to reproduce. She found the task elusive at first. While the shape overall had symmetry, it otherwise seemed stubbornly abstract, with

contours that made no sense — runneled striations and curled twists that she found fiendishly difficult to compile into a meaningful whole. When her captor — he'd called himself Rawhead, and recited an unnerving rhyme he'd taken it from — told her it was a face, that helped her make sense of certain features, but only to a point.

Dear god, the face of what? she had wondered, and what little he then told her, of underworlds and judges, sounded like madness. Maybe it was, but that didn't mean it wasn't true, because it already felt like she'd fallen into a place where madness reigned.

The next stage was building the clay model, and for this, and nearly everything else to come, she was going to need Michael's help.

As big as she could make, Rawhead had said, and she thought she could handle something upwards of nine or so feet in height. That was about as big as her kiln could accept for the ceramic molds, after they got it down to sections. Even if it was going to be a fraction of that size, she couldn't have worked on a solid lump of clay. Rather, the clay would have to be built up around an armature, and there was no way she could build a framework that size on her own, even if she'd had two good eyes.

Until now, she'd always hired assistants who came down from Taos, but she and Michael were on their own now. No one was coming in, just as no one was going out. To ensure solitude and people's safety, they'd made a lot of carefully monitored calls.

Rawhead had confiscated their phones the night this started, periodically returning them only long enough for her and Michael to put their lives on hold — a complete hiatus from professional and social entanglements — and maintain the illusion. For her assistants, all projects were paused until summer. For Michael's clients, all appointments were cancelled for the foreseeable future. They cited an unspecified illness and left it at that. As for the kids, they would be busy enough over the next few weeks with the second half of their spring semesters, so no worries about drop-ins there.

There wasn't a stage of her process that Michael hadn't witnessed, and whatever else he needed to know, she would have to teach him as they went. And so they began.

Constructing an armature of metal rods and foil took the better part of two days. Then she began with the clay, water-based, covering the entire framework with a thin layer and building it up from there. When she'd done everything she could at floor level, she used ladders and platforms.

She consulted the original relic as often as she needed to — something Michael was never allowed to be present for. She would trace her fingertips along it, trying to plot every bizarre detail, then extrapolate in scale. She developed a kind of internal split-screen technique in which she visualized the original on the right, its dimensions and features. On the left side, she held an image of the work-in-progress,

mapped with broader movements of her arms and hands. It seemed to work, for the most part, and whenever she strayed off track, Rawhead was there to tell her so.

A pound of clay at a time, the giant effigy took shape, a visage so hideous that it went easier when she refused to think of it as a face. And when she had no choice but to acknowledge that it was, the hardest thing to then conceive of was what manner of being would be gratified by its creation?



Most of the time, day after day, she and Michael were confined to the barn-turned-studio. It had just two regular doors in and out, and a larger set of double doors at the foundry end, which also served as a loading bay for moving the larger works out. Between the six of them, Rawhead and his five creatures, the exits were easy to guard, and none of them seemed to sleep.

Still, she could hope.

“If you get a chance to run, take it. Please,” she would tell Michael. “Better yet, grab a horse and ride. Cross country, they wouldn’t get far following you in his van.”

“Not without you,” he would tell her. “You know better than that.”

And Jessalyn loved him for it, even as she wished he loved her just a little less.

They were never out of the studio at the same time, and it was usually her, probably because they knew how futile it would be for her to try running. She was the one they took up to the house to bring back food. Michael was the one tasked with feeding the horses and mucking out the stalls. Not because Rawhead had any care for the horses’ welfare, but because he knew she would work better if they were being cared for.

Even now, five days into this, Michael still seemed haunted by whatever they’d done to their one horse that first night. He hadn’t offered details and she didn’t want to know. The next day, they’d let him use a tractor and chains to drag the carcass out, far away from the stables and barn. That same night, she’d had to cover her ears when the coyotes came in from the desert and descended on it, snarling and yapping for hours.

In whispers, Michael pondered various plans to kill their captors, then turned sullen whenever he inevitably realized he could never get all six fast enough. Anyway, these were not mortal men. Not anymore. Their lives might have begun that way, but something had turned them into feral husks of ruin and hunger. He feared they were beyond pain, and that they might even be eager for him to try. There was so much they could do in retaliation while leaving him still able to work.

Michael grew bearded and, while they did their best to wash up at the sink here at the end of the studio where she worked with clay, they both grew rank. They needed showers and changes of clothes.

And in the long nights before morning, when the darkness was the same as the light, she would run her hands over him to remind herself of every square inch of him, and to reshape whatever part of him was losing to despair. She even learned to love the stink of him, because as long as he smelled like this, it meant they both were alive.



A week in, she thought the clay model was finished, as close a likeness as she was going to be able to create. Rawhead agreed, and praised the similarity. Whatever he was, he often inspired waves of dread so strong they could be nauseating, but in the moment he seemed enthralled.

That seemed worse.

“One last thing for it,” he said, and Jessalyn heard him scoot one of the platforms over and spend the next couple of minutes working on it himself, apparently making some modification. “Come up here.”

When she did, he grabbed her hand and directed it to a spot that she discerned was between and just above the face’s eyes. Her fingers found a freshly made hollow there. With a little exploration, she discovered it was the same size and dimensions of the original effigy, a socket it would fit into.

“Leave that as it is,” he said. “Never fill that in.”

He only had to tell her once.

“What do you think of it?” she asked Michael, the next time he was allowed in.

“I’m trying to look at it as little as possible,” he said. “Loathsome. That’s the only way I can think to describe it.”

Yes. Loathsome. That was the feeling that had accrued in her. That shower she needed could never reach deep enough. “Michael? Are we doing the right thing?”

“We’re keeping each other alive. That’s all the right I care about now,” he said. “Whatever I need to deal with later can wait until then.”

Once the clay was thoroughly dry, she had Michael spray the whole thing with liquid silicone. Now they could start creating the initial mold, built up from multiple coats of silicone rubber. When that was thick enough, it had to be covered in plaster to create a hardshell. Once they split that and peeled it from the clay original, they had a front half and a back half they could work with separately from now on, like two huge shells. They were still heavy, still cumbersome, but Rawhead had his pets, as he’d called them, pitch in as needed.

At this point, over the coming days it was more supervision on her part than creation. Making wax duplicates from the rubber mold, and adding the sprues for pouring the bronze. Building up a ceramic mold over each wax shell, then heating these in the kiln to melt the wax and hollow them out.

While the final molds were heating, they fired up the foundry and added dozens of ingots to the main crucible. They then decanted the molten bronze into crucibles small enough to be handled with pouring shanks so they could fill the pair of heated molds.

Late that night, after the bronze had cooled, came the moment of truth when Michael chiseled away the ceramic molds to reveal what they'd made.

"How does it look?" she asked him.

"Like something that shouldn't exist."

There was still much work to be done. He'd have to cut away the stalks left from the pouring channels, then grind down the stubs. It would take all of them to stand the halves upright and fit them together, so he could weld them into one. Patination, too, if it was something Rawhead cared about, and she wasn't sure he did. The most challenging parts of the process, though, were done.

She had a different relationship with finished pieces than most artists might. She could never see them, but she could hold them, hug them, fit herself around them. Not this one. She would never want to embrace *this*. It felt... malevolent.

"More. I still want more of them," Rawhead told her. "How long to make more?"

"This one took almost all the bronze that was here," Michael said. "How long for you to shit more bricks?"

Jessalyn darted her hand around his, to squeeze it and quiet him down before he could say worse.

"The rubber molds should be good for more. If we lose those, we can go back to the clay model and start from there," she said. "But Michael's right, there's not enough bronze left. And we probably only have enough wax and silica for two more full final molds. If we double up on those and get started right away, get more bronze ordered? It would be here in time to have two more castings in a couple of weeks."

But as she listened to herself talk, Jessalyn supposed she was only buying time. She found it a devastating question, exhausting to contemplate. *More*? It had taken them close to a month to get this far. Was this really how they wanted the last weeks or months of their lives to go? Enslaved until their usefulness was spent, then, most likely, killed? They would have to talk about this in the night.

And not once had she ever understood why Rawhead wanted more than one.

"Finish this first one," he said. "You have until tomorrow afternoon. If you fail in that, I will allow you to pick the horse that suffers for it."

She squeezed Michael's hand harder, felt him trembling, and knew it would be more rage than fear. He would work through the night for this, even if asleep on his feet.

"And we spoke days ago about how you move a work this size."

She'd never brought it up until he'd asked. Then told him of an area trucking service that she and a gallery in Taos had employed a couple of times, using a flatbed truck with a hydraulic crane behind the cab.

"I have your phones. I will keep your husband's with me. Yours, I give to Raptor." His name for one of the monstrosities he'd brought with him. "In the morning, Raptor will let you have it long enough for you to call this service and arrange to have them waiting to hear from you later in the day, and send the truck as soon as you call again. If they hesitate, you will offer them more money until they agree. Then you will give Raptor back the phone and wait. When I call you, you will call for the truck. If he dislikes anything he hears from you, *he* will pick the horse. Do you understand?"

He never had to tell her anything twice.

Then, of all the unexpected things, he drove off into the dead of night and left them alone to the oversight and mercies of his pets.



When M'kaal left to seek a vision in the wilds, they'd numbered two. Upon his return, he was one, alone. If the people of the Ta'alun wondered what had become of D'jaal, they knew better than to ask. Anyone could see that this was a changed man, who now had need of a mask to protect anyone he came near. They'd all heard ancient tales of people who had dwelt in the presence of a god. Such people might return with their countenances forever changed, too radiant for others to look upon and keep their minds from breaking at the reflected glory the seekers' faces had absorbed.

What one man could survive, perhaps his brother could not. So let him keep his own counsel. Let him grieve in his own manner.

Letting his mask lead the way, M'kaal returned to his home. He embraced his wives, Kita and Myrya. With their eyes averted, he lifted the mask high enough so that he could kiss the children they'd borne him, and tell them how dear they were to him, each in their own way.

The girls looked like their mothers. The boys looked like him, or as he once had, and it did his heart good to know that a younger version of the face he'd freely given might again be seen among his people. He remained just vain enough to hope so, and trusted that Hunger would not begrudge him that much. Especially in light of what he'd surrendered to her already, and all that remained for him to give.

With his brother gone, could there be anything more dear to him now than a firstborn son? They had named the boy Druthmak, and his years were three. Nowhere among his children did M'kaal see himself reflected more than he did in this boy, who loved to laugh and tumble and play with animals carved from

soft wood. If it was true that fathers and mothers lived on through their children, he had always expected Druthmak to carry him the farthest.

And he would. Just much sooner than either of them might have dreamed. And M'kaal counted it a good thing that, though his face may have been gone, he still recognized the feel of tears.

Later, as he always did upon his return, he bathed away the dust and sweat. Still wet from the river, he let Kita comb the tangles from his hair, and Myrya rub him with perfumed oil, so that he could once more sleep on his bed of rushes and blankets, like a civilized man who would soon realize an entire people's dream of seizing the world.

Yet the decision, he knew, was still not his alone.

He didn't rule by himself, but only as one of many equals, with Karnuth first among them and Father to them all. The council must have its say... and so the word went out for them to gather.

They came from every direction, came from near and far, as they could always be counted on to do whenever matters of great importance arose. They ascended the wide steps of the tallest tower men had ever built and converged in the council's hallowed chambers: shamans for war, shamans for crops, shamans for healing and for weather and for divining the will of the gods. Again, they met by the light of oil lamps fixed into the walls, and settled onto benches softened with the furs of animals, so they could listen to the testimony M'kaal had returned to give.

"The world we know and everything beyond it... today it all lies before us like a ripening crop," he told them. "All that remains for us to do is choose to harvest it."

There was power in his words, power *behind* them. They all felt it. He saw them shift and stir with an impact as sure as any he'd ever delivered with a club, crude tool that it was.

"It will take sacrifice, but we are no strangers to that," he continued. "Many of us have bled for the glory of our people and this city and our land. If we have not bled, then we've followed where the spirits have led and walked the shadow lands between life and death. Some have lingered there so long the rest feared he might never return. But we do this because we know that to bend the world to our will does not come without a cost, and we have learned to pay it."

Every man of the council leaned in, as if they feared to miss a single word, and he knew that, as long as he did not let them drift, they would follow wherever he led.

"We have agreed on much, and have argued and fought when we have not. But still, we stand together. Now we stand on the edge of obtaining what was only a dream of our fathers, and their fathers before them. Our glory will be

theirs, through time, back to the beginning. The world *can* fall to us through the warriors of our own creation, that we can send out to conquer in our name while we build and plant and grow and prosper behind them.”

Had every man here not hungered for such a thing since he had first set down his toys and picked up a spear or a club? Had they not glimpsed it in the smoke and mist of visions?

“I have seen to this. The power is there to do it. The knowledge was bought at a heavy price, but I paid it, willingly. For all of us. Now I ask you: How many of you would have done the same?”

M’kaal tugged the mask from his head and stood revealed before them as they erupted with cries and recoiled in horror. As he waited for the uproar to subside, he sought Karnuth and found that even he, first among them and Father to them all, had trouble looking at him. And when Karnuth forced himself to do it, their eyes at last meeting, M’kaal was touched by the sorrow in them, the fathomless regret.

None of us would have asked this from you, Karnuth said without saying. Perhaps there is some knowledge whose cost is too great to bear.

Yet... might not that too have been part of a greater plan? Who could say no to him now, to ask him to have done it all for nothing? Within such leverage, a man of wisdom and learning might even recognize the subtle workings of Fate.

“So now I ask your consent to take the last few steps and carry us through this doorway where we stand,” he said, and looked out across the room. “Do I have it?” From one to the next, he challenged them with a baleful stare. “*Do I have it?*”

Yes, they murmured, one and two at a time, even if they could scarcely meet his gaze. Yes and yes and yes again.

Karnuth stepped up close to him, the only one who did, to clutch him by the shoulders and look him in the eye, no longer cowed by what he saw.

“If your heart has led you this far, then astray or not, you can only follow it the rest of the way,” Karnuth said in his softest voice. “I know you, M’kaal. I *know* you. My consent today will not mean as much to you tomorrow if you do not get the answer you want right now. Then you will go and do it anyway. I can only defer to your heart.”

And so they all agreed, down to the last man.

Two-and-forty strong, they stood together as one.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

When Rawhead had first looked into this town while doing his research on Jessalyn Blake, he thought it would be as good a place to begin as any. To test his idea and see how well it worked. And if it did? Today a town, tomorrow a city.

Now that he was here, after a drive through the deepest hours of night, he saw that the loathing he felt for it was well founded.

Larkspur, it was called, this town in Arizona. Why had people flocked here, built here, stayed here? That they must have found it a place of beauty was one of the more obvious reasons. It was a place of rugged hills and vast blue sky, ringed by enormous formations of rock as red as rust, and forests of evergreens. But there must have been many such places across this land, and these had been left barren, untainted by life.

Those who'd settled here must have known something else was present, even if they had no name for it. They would have felt it coursing underfoot, stirring deep in the ground. They would have thought it called to them, and that they belonged with it. That it would feed them somehow, the dim candlelight flickers they called their souls.

In pursuit of that, just look what repellent things they had done. They set up shop as healers and fortune tellers. They dug crystals from the earth and sold them as if these had value. They studied errant teachings from the other side of the world and swelled with pride at how adept they became at such nonsense. They worshipped light.

It was perfect. He would show them all there was to fear in the light.

A Fountain of Ma'at, this place was, and a reasonably potent one at that. While a fountain might flow far and wide, it had to bubble up strongest somewhere. There had to be a place it gushed.

To find it, he would need to do better than these people who whizzed past everything as fast as their wheels would carry them, and believed they'd actually

experienced it. As the sun rose on Larkspur and chased away the night, he left the van parked and set off on foot in the dew-damp chill of dawn.

Rawhead detached his perceptions from the grid of their streets and followed wherever he felt the life force flow. Sekhem had no need for streets. Rather, here it followed hills and hollows, swirled around stones and crept across plains in slow and stately sheets. He would shut his eyes and let the awareness wash over him, until it was not just a simple feeling, but a feeling with direction, and then stay with it until he could distinguish destination from source, upstream from downstream.

He spent the remainder of the morning at it, wandering where the currents suggested, a meandering path that would've made no sense to anyone other than himself, should someone have been watching.

And did they think the high desert had spat a devil into their midst, the more sensitive among the sops who lived here, who pilgrimaged here, who thought they could find the meaning of their lives here? To be sure, many gave him wary glances when they got too close, as had the doomed of Waterford. The one delicious difference was that here there were actually some who looked at him with pity, as if they longed to somehow help him.

And they could. All they would have to do was perish with as much drawn-out suffering as possible.

The sun was at its highest overhead when Rawhead was satisfied that he had isolated what he'd come seeking. A fountain this place may have been, but there was no singular source from which all currents flowed. It helped to instead think of the area as a turbulent pool with an epicenter.

He found it on the western edge of town, on a gentle rise overlooking the main street. He'd sensed no stronger spot than here, at the foot of a fortress of red sandstone, pillars and slabs and boulders left rounded by thousands of years of wind and rain.

He blessed this earth for the curse it would bring.



He supposed it was inevitable that someone, mortal or Deathless or both, would be looking for him.

Who saw the other first? He didn't know and it didn't matter, because the only thing that mattered was who *reacted* first. Rawhead had the advantage over them there. He was quicker, with a hunter's instincts, and certainly neither of these two could have been more vicious than he was by birth. While they were still trying to process the sight of him walking up along this parking lot at the center of a nest of studios and shops, he knew precisely why they must have been looking over the van. Instincts told him that it was something they'd been hoping to spot for some time now.

Two, a male and a female. He couldn't know who'd sent them. He couldn't know if there were more. He could only know how they would die.

He rushed the final few steps and stiff-armed the male in the throat, driving him back headfirst against the side of the van with a thud. With the other hand, he lashed out at the female as she tried to turn and run. He missed her skull but caught her by the shoulder, a glancing blow that wobbled her off balance, then he lunged to catch her by the hair and yank her back before the male hit the ground. He squeezed her throat before she could make another sound, then he had the van's panel door open and shoved them both inside and rolled the door shut again behind them.

Had anyone seen? If they had, it may have gone so quickly they couldn't be sure *what* they'd seen. He fought his impulse to jump in the van as well, and simply stood on the asphalt beneath the bright and sparsely clouded sky, taking stock of everything near and far.

Not one person pointed. Not one raised an alarm. And in that moment, Rawhead thought he understood them better than they would ever know themselves.

They'd seen nothing happen because they believed they were in a place where such things *couldn't* happen.

Satisfied, he drove away as if nothing had.



Half an hour later, there was nothing more to see in any direction than brown earth and ocher rock and a few hardy trees trying to cling to life. Rawhead pulled off onto a side road of dirt and traveled down it far enough to get the van well off the highway.

He crawled into the back to join the corpse and the one who soon would be. The male who'd come for him had roused from his stupor, but nothing more could come of it. Rawhead had used the sleeves of the female's shirt to bind his wrists and ankles, with a bit left over to stuff into his mouth.

He plucked out the gag, then asked who'd dispatched them, but the young man was reluctant to answer. So Rawhead kept at it, poking this and peeling that to give him a sense of urgency, until he finally came out with the name Setka. Rawhead found it a familiar name without knowing precisely why, only that he took an immediate dislike to it, annoyed enough to keep going with the poking and peeling even though he had his answer. It helped him think...

And then, ah yes, he had it. Setka was instrumental in the making of what he was now. Without a Setka, there would never have been a Rawhead. He owed Setka everything. Strange, then, how he could hate and appreciate in equal measures. Much like it was with Ammut, the oblivion goddess, she whom he revered and reviled.

“Do you know where we came from?” he asked this suffering creature that lay curled before him on the van floor. “The ones of us you call Shuankhsen. Do you know where?”

He couldn’t tell if the creature did or not. Well, he would listen, regardless. Rawhead had been merciful enough to leave him both ears.

“I am not of the old ones, but I have their memories anyway, the ones no one could forget,” he said. “They were lowly, just as I once was. They were the dregs of the Nameless Empire, the rubbish of the City of Pillars. Beggars, lepers, slaves. Prisoners, heretics, whores. They... *we*... were disposable. Our worth didn’t come from our station in life, but from our capacity to suffer in death.”

In the back of this little metal box in which he crouched, the air was stuffy and warm and growing hotter by the minute.

“We come from the same process as the one that made this Setka you serve. Did you know that? Did he teach you this? That there was a price for his existence, and we were it?”

He slapped the creature’s face to keep him attentive, and stuffed the gag back into his mouth so he wouldn’t interrupt anymore.

“It takes a primal force of power to create the kind of slaves who will stay bound to their masters and their duty across death and time. What greater primal force is there than hunger? That’s what she is, you know. Ammut, the Devourer. Hunger incarnate. She agreed to share her power with the sorcerer-priests of Irem who made your Setka, but the Rite of Return would have its price. For every one like him, there was one of us.”

It was important that this young man understand the truth of what he’d served.

“Soldiers will slaughter anyone if you convince them there’s enough glory at the end of it. They rounded them... us... up by the thousands. Butchered us, burned us, buried us alive to suffocate. They herded us into temples and brought the roofs down on top of us. The souls *rained* into the Underworld, and each and every one flooded into *her* mouth. Suffering was her godly nectar.”

Now the boy knew they were speaking the same language. At this moment, above all things, he knew suffering.

“But it doesn’t end. It only ever goes on,” Rawhead told him. “We live, we die. We live again, we die again. And every death we die, she gets to eat us one more time.”

Did he believe, this servant of a slave? Did he care? Had he even heard it all? His time was nearly up, regardless.

“So our wrath is not without good cause,” he said. “And since I can eat your heart just once, surely you can’t begrudge me that.”



For this first and all-important rite of binding, M'kaal wished to select the one side of the balance with as much care as he had chosen the other. *Bring along your slave, and bring me my meat*, Hunger had told him. *And for this first time, be sure that the meat is dear to you.*

And so it would be. But he could not escape the feeling that the first vessel for his will should receive as much deliberation as the choosing of his firstborn.

Two days he spent at the quarries and the brick pits. M'kaal watched as slaves hauled up the stones and stacked them on sledges they would drag to the dam. He studied other slaves as they chopped straw to mix with the mud for bricks, noting how effectively, how fiercely, they brought the blade down. He looked over the build of their bodies, seeking the strong ones who had years to go before they would show signs of being broken by their labors.

He was content to observe, although his continued presence seemed to unnerve the masters. To their credit, the slaves paid him no heed and went about their work. The masters, though, nervously flicked their lashes and twitched their goads whenever he was about. Very likely they had heard by now of where he'd been and why; what had happened there and how he had returned.

He presented himself better now, at least. He had wasted no time in crafting a new mask, better in every way and befitting a civilized man. He'd carved it from soft wood, thin but sturdy, shaped to follow the bones and contours of his remaining visage. It covered him from brow to chin, but he felt it should do more than that — it should adorn him, too. Thus, he fashioned it after the creature they called the *doth*-bird, with a long, tapering bill curving down from the center of the mask.

Why? He supposed it was because he respected it, above even fiercer creatures, for the ease with which it found a home. White of plumage and black of head and legs, the *doth*-bird roamed the marshes along the Great Mother River, then took to the air as needed, equally at home in water, land, and sky. It was a worthy lesson in adaptability.

In time, M'kaal made his choice, and had a quarry master pull the chosen slave from his tasks and bring him over: a young man, powerful without being bulky, well-muscled but lean where he should be. He moved with efficiency and did not plod. His eyes were clear, sharp but free of resentment... resigned, perhaps, to his fate.

When asked, he gave his name as A'rkhias.

“Would you like a new life, A’rkhas? Because I would like to offer it to you,” M’kaal said. “I could force you if I wished. But I would rather remove that from what will follow. I would rather you choose it freely.”

A’rkhas glanced about at the quarry behind him, the slave-drawn sledges in the distance mired along rutted paths scored into the earth. “And walk away from all this?” he said. “A life of what?”

“Here, you work for the glory of the Ta’alun. You still will, but say yes and you will have a life of chances to win glory for yourself, too. You will be the tip of our spear, the edge of our club. You will never feel fear or pain again, and you will see places and things most of them here never will. You will do things they will never dare.”

No choice could have been easier to make. They left together, and the quarry masters seemed glad to see M’kaal go.

He saw to it that A’rkhas was treated well over the remainder of the day and into the next. Made sure he was fed as much as he wanted, and bathed, and that the ragged, unsightly beard was trimmed from his face. M’kaal arranged that he should sleep in comfort that night, with the pleasurable company of his choosing, and that garments suitable for a warrior were waiting for him to put on when he awoke.

And it was time.

For three days, M’kaal had debated with himself over where to perform the rite. His first notion was to return to the lush wilds west of the city, beyond the towers and temples, beyond the granaries and ovens, beyond bricks and quarried stone, where trees were still the tallest things in sight and everything was green except the birds. Magic, after all, could be capricious in the city, as though recoiling from the stink and clamor of too many people living too closely together.

But Hunger had promised to work with him wherever he wished, had she not?

Go to any place you deem sacred, and by the chant I have taught you, I will find you there.

The choice was simple, then. Ever since he’d set down his toys to pick up a spear and a club, there had been no place more sacred to him than the Temple of War. There was a savagery to it that called to him, lit by torches instead of oil lamps, its walls adorned with paintings of conquest and hung with honored weapons that had eaten at least a hundred lives each.

Here, he had A’rkhas drink a broth infused with the power of sweet and bitter herbs. He then bound his wrists and ankles with rope, because exactly what would happen here remained a mystery, and M’kaal could not trust him not to change his mind and run. Next, he wreathed A’rkhas with the smoke of

sacred plants, and attuned him to the currents of the cosmos with the vibrations of chant and song.

Through it all, his firstborn, Druthmak, whose years were but three, sat happily off to the side, watching when the proceedings interested him, playing with his toy lions and cats and lizards when they did not.

Earlier, M'kaal had told the boy's mothers nothing, neither the mother who had birthed him nor the one who loved him just as much. But they were women, with women's keen and frightful insights, and knew something was wrong when M'kaal took the boy with him. They both wept and begged, but were powerless beyond their tears and words, because they knew there were always more hands needed to make bricks.

At last, with every preparation complete, the moment had come to consecrate this bargain between man and goddess. M'kaal began to intone the words she'd given him. The spell was long, but after all, she had inscribed it on the clay of his mind, so that he might never forget it, even when the air around them turned thick and dark and strange.

She was coming. He could feel it as sure as he could feel wind and rain.

She was coming, and had left her guise as a woman behind her, in the desert. Coming in her full, terrible glory, a nightmare of appetites made manifest. She was coming, crossing the most secret gulfs between the worlds of the living and the dead, surging like an enormous serpent with a vast and ravenous mouth. He saw her as he might a mountain in the distance, still far beyond the temple walls... saw her through the hidden eye within his mind that, once opened, need never blink and could never go blind.

He continued to utter the words she'd given him, striving to reach the end of the spell to summon her the rest of the way... yet it was growing inexplicably harder, his voice stumbling on words when it should have soared, until he fell altogether silent as if betrayed by his own body. His tongue was held and his throat was seized, choked by an unseen hand, then it was as though the very bricks beneath his feet turned back to mud.

And he fell.

He slipped through mud and earth, spun through mists and time. Still, he saw the goddess as if through a veil of rain, only now she was receding away. Even if he could still speak to bring her onward again, he was beginning to forget the words, as they were wiped from the clay of his mind.

And they both, it seemed, were powerless in the tides of Fate.

If the goddess who'd called herself Hunger had the power of a river, then Fate had the power of the seas. And so M'kaal fell, into the whirlpool it had opened.

Fate — he never knew it was even possible to offend it. He never knew it could have such wrath. He never suspected it might possess a sense of justice. Just as he never dreamed he could be so wrong about so much that mattered.

Perhaps there is some knowledge whose cost is too great to bear, Karnuth had told him, and as ever, the Father to them all was right.

His eyes saw no more, and he even began to forget his own name, for neither he nor Fate had any further use of it — even if Fate may have had some further use for *him*.

The last thing he heard was a clamor of shouts and screams erupting across the land of the Ta'alun, in this city they called I'ra'em, as the rest of the council followed behind him — following, just as he had hoped, wherever he might lead.

Two-and-forty strong, they fell together as one.



CHAPTER TWENTY

After so many eons, lifetimes upon lifetimes of women and men, it was still a wondrous thing to realize there was so much of the world she had never seen. It wasn't a matter of memory. No, this was new, everything on this journey — the mountains and horizon-stretching plains, the rivers, even a waterfall. Within Kemsiyet was a core of essence that refused to believe she could have seen such sights, then forgotten them.

Something, somewhere, would have sparked the memory and brought it all back. As she watched another dawn gather beyond the eastern rim of the sky, still an hour away, she sat in the darkness behind the rough-hewn home they'd occupied these past weeks, and had no doubts that all of it was new.

"I'm sorry what this has cost you. What *I've* cost you," came a voice from the shadows near the house. "Your latest turn on the Wheel. I never said I was sorry, but I am."

Like her, Setka was always up, always awake while the rest of them slept. As each new day dawned, Declan would be up and around first; it was his way. But for most of the night, it was just the two of them. Far from his city, his home, his followers, Setka often seemed to not know what to do with himself.

"It might have been worse," she told him as he joined her in the wicker chair beside hers. "I still have had a month here. It's never been free of woes. But it has had its small joys. I still am the better for it."

He seemed glad of this for her, and relieved that perhaps he'd cost her less than he believed. When he spoke, he seemed to strive to not sound cruel. "What good is that if the next time you arise, every memory of it is gone?"

Setka was not unchanged himself in his time here. Days ago, he had finally divested himself of the wig he'd worn, and left his eternally shaved head smooth and bare. He appeared altogether more serious, less frivolous, and she was dismayed with herself to realize that she didn't find it a particularly welcome change. The frivolity may not have been so silly after all.

He leaned close, making sure she could see him in the moonlight, and tapped his head. “Remember when I said there was so much up here waiting to be unlocked?”

“Of course. You seemed almost angry about it.”

“Emphatic, I think is their word for it,” he said. “Some months ago I remembered something from my last Sothic Turn. It’s amazing, what will set off a memory. Once you’ve got hold of one, you might have a whole chain of them. I remembered how I went off to find a mountain I’d heard about from a traveling merchant. Everyone here, they know it as Everest. For the people who actually live around it, it’s Annapurna. A prettier name by far, don’t you think? So I went to see it. And I did a bit of climbing, not much. They climb it now just to say they have, but for me it was enough to see it, and see it as they never could. I picked out a spot by a rock I found soulful, and sat there for a month. A whole cycle of the moon, I hardly ever moved. It pleased me to just sit still and watch Annapurna, what the light did with it. From hour to hour, it was never the same mountain twice.”

Yes, she thought. This would be a memory worth keeping.

“That was a beginning for me. That was the beginning of something new. Just a seed, and it took time, but it grew.” He craned his neck as if to look behind and beyond her, at the sawtooth shapes silhouetted against the western sky. “A mountain can be good for pointing you toward a new way. Maybe you should have your own talk with one before you leave this place.”

“I could.” She treated him to a smile of mystery she feared was mostly lost to the night. “Or I could have already, and how would you know?”

“I wouldn’t. If you have, that’s between you and the mountain, anyway, none of my business,” he said. “But if you ever wished to join me, you’d have a place, and you would be welcome. You don’t have to tell me if I’m right or wrong, but I sense in you the same stirrings that I felt after Annapurna.”

Now he reached across to tap *her* on the head, and she could not say she didn’t enjoy the touch of his finger.

“There’s so much more than just what there is up here to unlock. There’s a lot to learn at the root of what we are. Banefre believed all I am is a glutton for hedonism, and there may be some truth to that, but if he’d known the rest, he would’ve come at me twice as hard, and long before now.”

Setka almost didn’t have to tell her. Knowing Banefre as she had, his rigidity and fervor, it could only have been one thing.

“I’ve made it my purpose to gather as many heretical texts about us as I can find, and look into whatever truth they might have. If any,” he told her. “There is one idea that particularly intrigues me. I have found it in two different sources. If it has merit, it means we all have been lied to from the very beginning, from *before* the beginning, before they ever took our first lives...”

And when he told her what it was, Kemsiyet didn’t want to believe it. It couldn’t possibly be true — she told herself that, and told *him* that, until she realized the only

reason she had for believing what she always had was the insistence of the same priests who had put her to death.

“Think on it. That’s all,” Setka told her, then looked down at the crusty old book he’d loaned her, sitting beside her on a glass-topped wicker table. “Careful with that, though. I mentioned cost earlier? Nothing in there comes without a price. It all takes its toll.”

Inside the house, a light winked on in a window. Declan, right on schedule.

“Seductive, I’ll grant you that,” Setka told her. “I’ve always thought that must be why whoever wrote it made it so hard to crack the riddles and codes to get to the spells. He knew it would be that much more seductive once you had. I don’t think he was our friend.”

But she scarcely heard him, still dwelling on his earlier notions, perhaps the most heretical idea she’d ever heard: *What if the Judges aren’t what we think they are... ?*

A few minutes later, Declan was down, out the back door and quickstepping toward them across the lawn. This would be it. Another wheel somewhere had turned.

“Mum? Setka? A word?” he said.

“What is it?”

“There’s a team of spotters that hasn’t filed their overnight check-in. They’ve never missed a one, the entire month they’ve been in place. And I can’t raise either of them on the phone.”

“Where?”

“The Larkspur site. Northern Arizona. Southwest of here.”

She remembered the name, if not the details, and wanted to see the place. Inside the house, they gathered at a kitchen counter around a laptop that Declan had brought down. He called up a number of images for her, pretty pictures for pretty tourists: a quaint little town tucked amid mountains, humming with a life and vibrancy that welled up from below, or washed down on it from the crags above.

And something about it seemed so very familiar.

She traced a fingertip along the screen over the edges of red rocks, towering and bulbous and rounded. So familiar. Yet different. But across time and place, people were still people, were they not, and sometimes they did remarkably similar things.

“Show me Rio de Janeiro,” she said, well aware that her kind had been drawn to it for ages upon ages.

And look — look at that. A sprawling city, woven into the fabric of a range of seaside mountains, surrounded by pyramidal peaks and angular spires, green hillsides and rocky humps. A Fountain of Ma’at here, a Fountain of Ma’at there... only the scale of what people had built was different.

So many of the pictures had the same figure in them. Sometimes it was the focus of the foreground, and sometimes it was a tiny feature in the back, but it was always

singular and unmistakable: the giant white statue of these people's Christ, standing atop Corcovado Mountain with its arms stretched wide to embrace the city.

There were tales that said the statue's makers knew exactly what they were doing when they built it where they did. That the statue was *powered* by the site on which it was built, that what flowed there was harnessed and projected.

Across time and space, people sometimes undertook remarkably similar projects. Even when there was no longer anything human left in them at all.

She closed the page of Rio pictures and was left with Arizona underneath.

"Call your pilot," she told Declan. "We should go there now."



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

They worked through the last blackest hours of night by little more than the light of the high desert moon.

The greatest challenge came at the very end of this journey, when it came time to drive the flatbed truck up the hillside toward the base of the red rocks that overlooked the town from the west. The burdened truck would tilt and shift in a cacophony of spinning tires and grinding gears, but Rawhead fought it into place until it was as level as he was going to get it. The truck had supports along the side he could deploy to the ground to keep the thing more stable as the weight of its cargo shifted. After that, it was only a matter of lifting the completed effigy from the bed and maneuvering it around while the three Fasad he'd brought along helped guide it down.

He may not have known how to operate a truck crane when the night had begun, but he did now. Throughout his weeks of new life, Rawhead had found himself to be a quick study, observing and incorporating, then *doing*.

Last evening, he'd timed it so that Jessalyn Blake called the truck in and had it there a quarter-hour after his return. Rawhead handled it from there, as they kept her and her husband out of sight during the loading. The two drivers hadn't liked him, but when had this ever mattered?

"Are you a new assistant of hers?" one driver had asked.

"I'm her patron," he'd said. "I paid for this."

"Move it just like it is?" asked the other. "You're not having it crated first?"

"Like it is. I paid for this."

And so he'd had every right to watch as they supported and surrounded the great bronze effigy with a rig of load-bearing straps, then hooked onto it with the crane's arm. They hoisted it with slow care, swinging it up and around, and lowering it onto the center of the flatbed. He'd watched how the one driver operated the control panel, the buttons and levers and joystick. They'd covered it with a tarp and secured it with wide canvas straps for the ride.

Done. It should only be a relatively simple matter of reversing the process. It made matters easier that he didn't care about lifting or moving any other kind of cargo. He cared only about this one.

He'd left behind the corpses of both drivers, and two of his Fasad to mind their captives, and with the other three for himself, set off again for Larkspur.

Once the effigy was in place, overlooking the sleeping town from the west, he got the truck out of the way, bouncing it back down the slope and into the streets below. He found a parking lot where he could leave it, then walked back, hiking up the hill again to resume his magnificent work.

The Fasad were waiting where he'd left them, guardians with lacerated faces under the moon. They seemed to gaze down with longing at the town, and all the tender souls who stirred beneath their covers — their dreams perhaps darkened by a first passing shadow.

"May we?" one of them asked. "When the time comes?"

"We'll see," he said. "But you have earned your sport. And you should be given something more satisfying than horses."

Then he shooed them aside so they would stay out of his way. He circled the great effigy where it sat upon the crown of the hillside as if now a part of it. He ran his hand along its cool surface, across the strange, unnerving patterns of striations and scars and swirls. Beneath his feet, the energies gathered and eddied as they had for eons, perhaps since the day this land had risen, disgorged from the primal sea.

After he'd made his circuit around it, he retreated to the base of the red rocks behind him. He opened the stolen pack he'd been living out of since passing through Wales, and from one its pockets retrieved the original: the true face of Arem-Abfu, the Final Judge, the first depiction of that which should never have been depicted.

He brought it to its bronze counterpart, then reached high, stretching to his limits as he socketed the Blasphemous Depiction into the hollow he'd created for it.

And the earth beneath his feet responded.

All his anger, all his spite, all his wrath... he conjured them from within and without. He summoned them forth across time and space. He stood beneath the stars and reached for the earth's core... then *pulled*. He became the channel for his kind, all of them, forever hated and despised, condemned to be butchered for no greater crime than being of lowly birth. He ascended to the pinnacle of their achievements, daring to do what no Shuankhsen had ever dreamed.

Beneath his feet, the Fountain surged. The twin effigies, ancient and new, merged as one, then began to vibrate and hum in subtle sympathy. And fueled by the Fountain, they gathered strength, as though taking in a cosmic breath in advance of the shriek.

In the town below, life began to stir.

The sky lightened as the earth turned toward the sun. The first red crescent rose above the horizon, continuing to climb until its light struck his creation in full, then reflected back as this face of the faceless cast its baleful gaze across the streets and roofs of the town.

By its very novelty, having appeared overnight, it would compel them to look.

Rawhead waited for the music of ruination.

The first note he heard was a car crash. In time, something else began to burn. Shouts and screams and laughter, too, first in isolation, then as choirs. It fed on itself like a brushfire, and he recalled yesterday's observation, thinking how these people believed they lived in a place where such things could never happen.

It made the sound all the sweeter.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

As they banked in over the crags and pine-covered hills, the first signs of disaster were the plumes of smoke rising from multiple spots in the town. As the helicopter got closer in, and lower, Declan was able to see tangles of car wrecks, and people thronging here and there in the streets. Even from this far above, that something was terribly wrong with them seemed obvious. Normal people didn't move that way, as though they didn't know where to go, and every new direction they turned repelled them worse than the last.

Many weren't moving at all, and never would again.

The hell of it was, he couldn't actively look for the problem. Not himself, nor Fiona, nor the trio of Setka's people who were along, either. The scariest part was having a pilot as mortal as the rest of them, and if he had the misfortune of locking eyes on the wrong feature down there, well, that wasn't the bloke you wanted flying your helo anymore.

Declan had given him plenty of warning. You're going to see some strange things, he'd told him. *Really* strange things. He was a veteran, the pilot had countered. He said he'd seen lots of weird shit.

How Kemsiyet had figured it out remained a minor miracle to him. Yes, the idea took root in her head from seeing all 98 feet of Christ the Redeemer watching over Rio de Janeiro, but still — if the idea had occurred to him, Declan would have immediately dismissed it. It was too far beyond the bounds of what seemed possible.

However bloodthirsty this Shuankhsen may have been, however much he'd reveled in using the Blasphemous Depiction to leave a pub full of casualties in his wake, no way could he have scaled it up. It was supposed to be a one-off, and even at that, shouldn't have existed at all. It was beyond the abilities of a human being to so much as look at the effigy with one's mind unscathed, much less work with it.

But then, consider: With 6000 and more years of history to draw on, however random her memory, Kemsiyet would have been exposed to things beyond his frame of reference.

She would have known masters who sliced out the tongues of their servants so they could never share their secrets. Or deafened them, so they could never overhear the secrets in the first place.

She would have known sultans who cut men into eunuchs to guard their harems.

She would have known priests and warlords who killed the builders of their strongholds, so they could never divulge to an enemy the whereabouts of hidden passages and chambers.

In light of all that, was the notion of a blind sculptor really so outlandish? Had it come from anyone else, he still probably would have scoffed. Coming from her, he at least had to entertain the idea.

After they were on board the helicopter with a flight path to the southwest, he got on his phone and started researching. And goddamn if she wasn't onto something. There really was such a person. More than one, actually, but most of the attention went to a woman named Jessalyn Blake. Who lived but a six to seven hour drive from Larkspur.

He couldn't find a public phone listing for her, but it wasn't a problem for the crew back in London. They had one for him in a few minutes, and he spent the duration of the flight trying to get a call through. It wasn't happening. The more times he tried, the worse it got: that feeling something was wrong at the other end, and he was the only one out here who knew it, and there was nothing he could do about it because they couldn't divert the flight and he couldn't be in two places at once.

"There. There it is." Kemsiyet was pointing in a direction he dared not look. "At the base of those rock formations."

"Set me down as close as you can!" Setka called out to the pilot.

They'd circled the town once, and so the helicopter swung back around to the north, then swooped down toward a plot of open ground opposite the rocks, on the other side of a two-lane highway, clear of power lines. He kept the nose, and everyone inside, pointed away from the effigy at its base, then settled onto the runners with a lurch and cut the turbines.

Setka was out the door before the rotors even slowed, took off in a crouching run, and was gone.

"Mum? Tell us when we can look."

The seconds ticked by, and it felt as if he'd never had more time to worry about a person than he had right then to worry about Fiona. She shouldn't have come, but she wouldn't hear of staying behind. She shouldn't leave the helicopter, but she would do it anyway. She'd seen enough carnage for a lifetime already, and came knowing she was going to see more.

Kemsiyet tapped his arm and gave him the nod. "Still don't look its way any more than you must. You never know."

Too right. You never did. Firearms drawn, handguns mostly, Declan and the others stepped out of the passenger cabin into an eerie soundscape of alarms and far-away impacts and the sounds of human suffering. It was the scattered din of people pushed to the extremes of a hundred different emotions, never knowing which was right, and so they gave voice to them all.

He couldn't imagine that it would have involved everyone in town. Hundreds or more could be lying low indoors, terrified to come out and not even knowing what it was they were afraid of. This place would never be the same.

But now, at least, the rest had a chance.

Declan wished he could have seen it unfold from the beginning. Setka had gone back to the same utterance that he used when they'd gone to meet with him in his tower. A party trick then, creeping up on them in a cocoon of portable darkness, he'd now unleashed it in its full grandeur, thickening the air around him into a yards-wide cloud so dark he used it to utterly obscure the effigy. It had followed him up the hillside, Setka the axis at its core, and as it continued to gather density, its outer edges spiraled and whirled with tendrils of black smoke.

Whether it helped anyone in the town get from Point A to Point B with mind intact, Declan couldn't know. But when he caught the first movement rushing away from the town center, *toward* the hill, he knew that somebody had to have been spared.

Fasad... three of them. They were too far distant to see their faces, but nothing else could have been covered with so much blood, and moved so fast. Just turned them loose, had Banefre? Sent them out to have their fun?

Declan was the first to open fire, and Setka's three followed his lead. But between pistols, distance, and moving targets, they didn't manage much. And these were Fasad, after all. They could take more than a few hits and keep going.

Somebody got lucky and dropped the nearest one — a structural hit, maybe, ankle or knee — and everyone made sure this one stayed down for good. The other two didn't slow, homing in on Setka and his cloud at the top of the hill. His three guards broke into sprints, hoping to intercept.

Declan, though, hung back, loath to stray too far from Kemsiyet in case of a sudden threat to her. Ordinarily she could take care of herself better than most anything he could do for her, but at the moment? No. Her focus was too occupied...

As the dust and soil in a wide radius around her began to sift into the air, as if rejecting gravity. Give it time.

Setka's people needn't have worried anyway. Clearly, he saw the other two Fasad coming before they were anywhere near him, and after another moment or two, the edges of the swirling cloud morphed from smoke to sandstorm, and spewed a blizzard of particles at them. It slowed them, stopped them, then doubled in fury to strip away their clothes in whirling tatters and blast the flesh their bones. They tumbled into raw heaps, and within another few seconds were buried by the storm.

And Banefre? There was still no sign of him...

Until one of the others gave a shout and pointed, and fucking hell, there he was after all. He was only just now coming into view on the rust-red rocks, but higher than they would have expected. He'd done some climbing — maybe been climbing this entire time, out of sight until now.

No. Oh, no. No no no.

Frantic, seeing what was about to happen, one of Setka's men unslung the rifle he'd been carrying across his back. He sighted and fired, sighted and fired, then a third time and a fourth, but the closest he came was ricochets.

From his place on an overhanging ridge, Banefre leapt without hesitation or fear, clutching in his hands a chunk of sandstone the size of a pillow. He let it lead the way as he plummeted into the heart of the cloud.

When the darkness and smoke dissipated, only one of them was standing there, and the rock was redder than before. Banefre flung it in their direction with all the contempt in his heart.

Declan realized too late that he'd forgotten to not look, then his vision was gone.



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

No one would be coming for them. Or if someone did, it would be a bloodbath.

They'd accepted this within the first day or two. Past that, Jessalyn supposed, a form of survivor mentality had kicked in. These ghouls were here for a reason. They were here for results. So produce, then. Deliver. Giving them what they wanted meant living another day.

But there had to be an inevitable end to it, and after last night she could see that it was coming.

More. How long to make more?

They were nothing but a resource here, to be used up and cast aside. And she refused to be the one still clinging to hope while being escorted to the gas chamber. Michael felt the same. If they were to die, he'd whispered to her in the night, he would rather die fighting.

And the time had come. They would have no better odds than after their captors had divided their forces.

Sleep, though. They'd still needed to sleep. They'd been up a day and a night and all the next day, finishing the first of the sculptures, and by the time Rawhead had rolled away with it on the truck, she and Michael were having a rough time thinking straight. If they were going to do this, they were going to do it while giving themselves a chance, not while slow and exhausted and muddle-headed.

And so, as had become the routine, they rose this morning and got right to work. Back to molds, melting wax and pouring it into one of the rubber negatives. Letting it dry, pouring more, building it up. These ghouls left to watch them had seen it all before, and by now it should've been very routine to them.

They were obedient, slavishly so. They were cruel. And they were devoted to their master, in his presence and his absence alike. But it was apparent that they simply weren't that bright. As long as she and Michael did their work, work they'd seen before, this pair of decaying creatures left them alone.

And if they'd had a couple of hours to get used to one small furnace melting wax, would it strike them as unusual when Michael fired the foundry forge? Would they find it odd when he filled one of the smaller crucibles with the last few ingots and scraps of bronze?

She took heart that they evidently didn't. If they thought it unusual, they never would have let it get this far. Now, another forty-five minutes or so to let it melt...

The one strange thing that came up was the persistent ringing of her phone, still left with the creature called Raptor. It trilled every ten to fifteen minutes. Each time, Raptor would look at it, and apparently the caller display meant nothing to him — not Michael's phone, like last night — and so it was safe to ignore.

Once meant nothing. Twice was a coincidence. Three times, a pattern.

"Do you think someone knows about us?" she whispered to Michael.

"If they do, they don't know enough," he said. "We can't wait. The longer we wait, the more time we give the others to get back. No. We're doing this *now*."

He was right. Now. It was all about now.

Forty minutes in, Michael took her by the hand and led her to one of the rubber molds they'd been working with, the big shells made from the original clay sculpture, thick silicone and thicker plaster. They each took a side and made a show of trying to move it on their own.

"Hey!" Michael said, anger in his voice that he didn't have to fake. "Aren't you ugly motherfuckers supposed to *help*?"

Were they indecisive? Maybe. But Michael wasn't moving, wasn't backing down, and at last they crossed the studio's molds room to help. One two three *lift*, and Michael directed them all through the wide doorway into the casting room, toward the foundry. The heat enveloped her, the hot metal smell of the bronze tingled her nose.

Had they gleaned enough about the process to know a rubber mold from a casting mold? They couldn't have. Because they were here.

One two three *lower*, and Michael had them set it down, then she immediately slid two steps toward the forge and found the handle for her end of the cross-support of the crucible.

How Michael managed, she didn't know, whether he clubbed one from behind, or pushed it, or knocked its legs out from beneath it. She only knew there was the sound of an impact, and he told her *now*, and together they tipped the crucible forward to dump ten pounds of molten bronze onto him, with a loud searing hiss and a burst of noxious steam.

They could scream after all.

Michael had wanted her running as soon as it was done — he didn't know if he could win a struggle with the last one, and didn't want her waiting to find out. So she

ran. Against every impulse to stay by his side, she ran, she heard him bellow with rage, then a crash.

Jessalyn made it out the door by the loading bay, into fresh air and the feel of sunshine, and plotted her course on the map in her head. *The stables*. The farther she got from the studio, the less likely it seemed she would run into something that had been left where it wasn't supposed to be, and the faster she ran. *Just let her get to the stables*.

Before she was anywhere near them, she clearly heard that she was being pursued. Raptor, by the sound of it. Maybe that was the directive these things had followed all along: *Never ever let the prisoners escape*.

When she burst through the stable's eastern door, her nose filled with the exquisite and comforting smell of horses. She raced along the central corridor, stalls on either side, the horses instantly nervous because they'd picked up on her fear.

As she passed each stall, she slapped at the latches on the doors and let them fly open. When she reached the end, she veered from the corridor into an empty stall, the one left by Onyx, the one they'd killed, and tumbled into a cushion of sawdust and old hay.

Raptor had been moments behind her, and was now in the stables, too, and as for what happened next, she could only hear it, could only imagine it from the sound. The horses were loose, and they would know the sight of him, the smell of him, the terrible evil essence of him.

The horses looked out for her, she'd always liked to think.

One of them screamed, obviously in pain, and her heart ached for it... and then all seven of them *really* went to work. This was what so few people understood about horses, stallions especially. Pain didn't dissuade them. Pain, instead, spurred them on to rear and lunge and fight, with snapping teeth and flailing hooves.

As Michael said later — bloodied but unbowed — it was a good thing they had shovels, because that was the only way they were going to scrape up what was left of him.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

You couldn't call it foresight, nothing like that. Just clarity. Just seeing what was about to happen, having a pretty good idea what was going to follow from that, and knowing not everybody would react in time. Not even Declan. Because he would still be so intent on trying to stop it, even as it happened right before his eyes.

When Fiona saw the Shuankhsen appear up on the outcropping of red rock, saw him hoist the boulder, saw him jump straight down into the center of swirling cloud, she didn't wait to see the outcome. She already knew. Banefre wasn't going to miss. He was going to crush Setka's skull and that would be that.

She turned her back on it and ran toward Declan's side. If he reacted badly, thought she was something attacking him, blindsiding him, well, that was the risk she would have to take. She clapped her hand over his eyes and he flinched, his own hand darting up to grab her wrist. What if he broke it — things like that came easily to him. Just as quickly he relaxed his hold and bowed his head, then he held her around the shoulders and turned away as well.

By the sound of it, at their backs now, one of Setka's men hadn't been so quick. It sounded as if the other two were trying to subdue him, drag him away to safety.

It was all on Kemsiyet now. The weeks of study, the weeks of practice...

Fiona had never witnessed a more frightful sight than this.

She recalled how Declan had put it: *If it were me? Petty, vindictive me? I'd want to take the same spell my factory fresh enemy had used to break in and steal from me, and turn it right back on him, whenever I got my chance to make him pay.*

And so she was.

It was the same utterance, only wielded with even greater power, more terrible effects. It was, in its way, the reverse of what the Shuankhsen had done to breach her tomb. Instead of swimming her way *through* the earth, repelling it ahead of her to grant her passage, Kemsiyet gathered it to her. Loose earth rose from the ground around her. It cascaded across the plains from every direction as if drawn by

a vacuum, a hole in space and time. Dust clouds churned in the air and found their way to her body.

It built up in layers like sediment — rocks, too, anchored in the shell that grew around her. It continued to accumulate even after there was no more of her to be seen, piling thicker, higher, until it was as though she'd been transformed into a golem, a living statue worthy of guarding a temple doorway twelve feet high.

And the earth began to tremble at her footsteps.



Across the ground, she came.

Across the highway, she came.

Up the hill, she came, and even Rawhead could agree there was symmetry and even poetry to it, because it proved that she had planned this. She had foreseen the moment and made it happen *this way*, as the most perfect expression of her anger she could think of. Yes, she too could be cruel.

There was a part of him that remembered he'd known her, that he had thought her too soft, too much of the mother left in her, too concerned with heart and wisdom at the expense of obedience.

He had forgotten, perhaps, a mother's desire to protect.

He might have been able to fight back in kind, but feared there wouldn't be time enough to prepare, and anyway, she'd already gathered all the earth the land could spare. And he was weary, and nothing could take away the pride in what he'd done, and if Fate had any say about it, his deeds would resound across time as a legend.

Atop the hill, she came, a colossus towering above him. A hand the size of a tombstone rose, then fell, and his body burst beneath it...

Then he fell as well, through gray murk and mists, and everything was quiet once more.

He'd hoped they all had been wrong about what would happen next. But they were not... and Ammut, ever hungry, was waiting, she whom he revered as well as reviled.

She smiled her eager welcome. She began with his heart.



Deep within the shell of hardened earth, which was her body and yet was not, Kemsiyet became a destroyer.

After the Shuankhsen was sent back to the carnivorous mercies of Duat, she turned her attention to the effigy he'd had made, battering at it with fists like stones, crushing it from the top down. She caught sight of the original, this relic she'd spent

lifetimes guarding — it popped loose of the hollow made for it in the bronze and skittered down the slope as if, just maybe, it had a longing to still be free.

When at last the giant relic was crushed and dented like a tin can, she wrenched it free of the spot where they'd stood it, and cast it tumbling down across a talus field to do it further harm.

And it was done.

The next moments seemed very long, and didn't wholly connect together in her mind. The earthen shell no longer felt solid around her. Her arm passed through it — her true arm — and her shoulder followed. The sun and air were on her face again, and the sky above, then she tumbled free and hit the ground.

She crawled. One last thing. One last flare of purpose. One... last... .

She could sense it close by, down the slope, drawn to it because nothing else had ever given her life more reason for being, even as there was nothing in the world she would rather have been rid of.

It wasn't that the life was leaving her — it never fully left her — but it eventually ebbed and dwindled even on the most tranquil Descents, and sometimes went much faster when spent on things of great price. As she crawled through the wreckage of bodies and bronze, she knew that this time, at least, it had been well spent.

She could hear the voices and footsteps of her people rushing up the slope to her. Two of them. Her cult, down to only two — that wasn't good — Declan and Fiona, but she trusted that with the both of them she would be in good hands. And as one thought led to another, a whole chain of them, she realized she was but a relic, too, passed down through generations, then ever so briefly recalled that she must have had the very same thought a hundred times before.

There — she got her hand around it, this hateful little thing that should never have existed. She pulled it to herself and wrapped it in a wad of tattered cloth and flesh and blood-soaked mud to blind its sight into the world.

Then she closed her own eyes to it as well, and hoped to remember as much of all this as she could.

She wished there had been more. She always wanted more.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

When she saw it again from the air, after the rugged earth tones of the American west for contrast, Fiona realized she'd forgot how green Ireland really was. Sometimes it wasn't a bad thing to forget something important, because the remembering was like falling in love with it all over again.

The flight had been long, and private or not, a long flight had a way of trapping you alone in the sky with your thoughts. It was time away from everything below, the same old fears and uncertainties that would be waiting for you when you landed. But if you used the time well, maybe you could be a wee bit better equipped to confront them once you did.

After seeing so many things get knocked and torn apart, it was probably inevitable that she dwell upon pieces, and how they might fit together now.

They had an Arisen who'd lost her cult. They had a cult who'd lost their master.

"What kind of match do you think that would make?" she asked Declan. "I mean, I've got my doubts she'd like it in London. And there's a bunch of Setka's people who seem like they'd only get bored after the first day in the south of Ireland. But do you think it could work?"

"Better than *you* might be thinking," Declan said. "A lot of those people Setka had around him, they'll just drift on once they get the idea nobody's footing the bill for them anymore. The ones that are left... they might. They're in it for the right reasons, and those don't necessarily have to change even if the figurehead has."

Fiona looked out the window at the gray plains of the North Atlantic skimming past below. "She needs a new priest, that's what she needs most of all."

Declan nodded. "Or a *priestess*."

"I don't know if I've got that in me, Dec. And if I have to ask..."

"Then what would you rather do? Say you could do anything, coming out of this. What would it be?"

As if she hadn't thought about this already. "There's a lot of crazy people in the world that weren't crazy two months ago. Don't you think *she'd* help them if she could? Well, that. That's what I'd like to do. I don't know if they can get their minds back the way they were, but there's got to be a way to get them better. That's what I'd like to get started on."

"It's a tall order."

"The money's there."

The vision had started to coalesce while they were still in American skies. She imagined a center where they could come for whatever help they needed, for whatever treatments could be devised. And at the heart of it, a sculpture for all of them, for the survivors, made by the only artist who could create it, because she knew exactly what they had encountered.

Fiona had met her, after they'd left Larkspur. He'd already been on the phone with her twice since, and liked her very much, this Jessalyn Blake. She had a feeling they would be on the phone a lot in the days and months, maybe even years to come.

"I'll make it work," she said.

Declan, with a wink and a nod: "I believe you can."

And after they landed, descending over the fields so green, he went to get the wheelchair secured near the forward bulkhead, unfolding it and locking it open so they could get Kemsiyet off the plane and to the car.



She was aware, most of the time, even if she had no way of letting them know.

She was aware of hurtling through the sky, a sensation still young and new to her, relative to the span of her days, but one she never expected to tire of.

She was aware of highways and roads, meadows and trees.

Then came a gap, and the next thing she grew aware of was the feel of a wet cloth and a soft towel and the touch of tender hands... a girl... Fiona, that was the name, wiping her clean and combing her hair free and loose, just so she could reweave the braid, thick as a serpent, coiled around one shoulder.

She was aware of arms around her, under her back and beneath her knees... Declan, yes, that was the man's name... and the ancient familiar feel of the tomb around her as he carried her from front to back. Home again. Home. *Home*.

She was aware of the heavy rattle of a sarcophagus lid, the clunk it made as it was set against the wall, then she felt the soft and giving embrace of cushions.

And in her mind, echoes of memory of a voice that she wanted to hang onto with the tenacity of a mountain climber hanging onto a cliff, so she would not fall: *What if the Judges aren't what we think they are? What if they're no more gods than we are? What if all they were was mortal men who were either elevated or lowered,*

depending on how you look at it? Because if that's all they are, then maybe it means there's that much less to stop us from breaking free of Duat for good.

And she was aware. But fading.

“Goodnight, Mum,” she heard. “Sleep well...”

Once more, quickly now, there was a touch of tender hands as a girl whose name she couldn't remember placed a necklace of cool metal in her own hand — yes, the ankh that was not yet an ankh, but something before there were ankhs, from a time and a place the world had forgot. She'd meant to bring it back.

She was aware as it took on a look of creeping corrosion and began to lose itself, just as she herself was. Tiny pieces flaked away and continued to crumble as they fell. It drizzled dust, *became* dust, until all that was left on this side of the divide was the cord. Soon, even the dust was nowhere to be seen.

Soon, their journey back to Duat would be complete.

She trusted that her Judge would be well pleased.



***Rawhead and bloody bones
Steals naughty children
from their homes,
Takes them to his dirty den
And they are never
seen again.***

So says the nursery rhyme that gives birth to Rawhead, the most fearsome entity to imperil the living since the infamous Roller. Once an obedient mummy by name of Benefre, a desperate bid by his cult fails in tragic fashion, and in so doing, sends him to the Devourer's waiting, corruptive maw. What remains of Benefre's ambitious soul rises again, impure and unholy, set to the execution of a scheme so baleful, it constitutes a heresy even among his own misbegotten kind.

All that stands between Rawhead and his terrible aim are a lone mummy, Kemsiyet, and what little remains of her cult following its destruction at Rawhead's hands. Declan, her prized security aide, and Fiona, an Irish researcher only just recently inducted into the cult and its blood-soaked world, must fight both the odds and the clock in order to prevent a calamity the likes of which the world hasn't seen since the days of the mummies' creation.

BRIAN HODGE is the acclaimed author of *II* novels, almost 125 short stories, and four full-length collections. His first collection, *The Convulsion Factory*, was ranked by critic Stanley Wiater among the 113 best books of modern horror. He's currently wrapping up his fifth, *The Immaculate Void*. Among gamers, he is perhaps best known as the author of the first official Hellboy novel, *On Earth as It Is in Hell*.

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